



**PROCEEDINGS
Seminar on**

Tourism for Attaining SDGs: Challenges and Prospects for Bangladesh

Monday, 30 September 2024



Organised by
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)



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SEMINAR ON

Tourism for Attaining SDGs: Challenges and Prospects for Bangladesh

BIISS auditorium, 30 September 2024



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a seminar titled “**Tourism for Attaining SDGs: Challenges and Prospects for Bangladesh**” at the BIISS auditorium on 30 September 2024. **Mr Md Touhid Hossain**, Honourable Adviser, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the seminar as the Chief Guest. **Nasreen Jahan**, Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh was present as the Special Guest. **Major General Iftekhar Anis**, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng, Director General, BIISS delivered the welcome address. Ambassador **AFM Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman, BIISS chaired the session.

Mr Abu Sufian, Executive Director of Tourism Research and Development, presented the keynote presentation. A panel discussion followed the Keynote presentation. The panelists were **Dr Sufia Khanom**, Senior Research Fellow, BIISS; **Dr Munal Mahbub**, Director in Charge, Standing Committee on Tourism, FBCCI and **Md Abu Kalam Siddique**, DIG, Tourist Police Bangladesh. There was an open discussion session after the panel discussion. Senior officials from different ministries, diplomatic missions, media, researchers, business people, academia, and representatives from various think tanks and international organisations participated in the seminar.

WELCOME ADDRESS



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng
Director General, BISS

Major General Iftekhar Anis extended his gratitude to the Chief Guest and the Special Guest for gracing the seminar with their presence and welcomed the participants. He initiated his speech with the observation that tourism stands out as one of the most pivotal industries in the world today. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the travel and tourism sector contributed 9.1 per cent to the global GDP in 2023. It is expected that it will further increase up to US\$ 1.9 billion by 2033. In Bangladesh, the sector is providing employment for nearly 1.7 million people. He expressed that for a country like Bangladesh, which is a developing country with a wealth of cultural heritage and natural beauty, tourism holds untapped potential.

He then cited some figure to shed light on the potential of Bangladesh's tourism sector. In 2023, around 6.5 lakh people visited Bangladesh, marking a 23 per cent growth from the previous year and surpassing the pre-COVID condition. This is the highest number of international tourists visiting Bangladesh since 2010. He argued that tourism may be considered as an important



government strategy for Bangladesh to enhance economic, social and environmental welfare. This promising sector can significantly boost the country's GDP, foreign exchange earnings, income generation, employment and overall community welfare. He was hopeful that the government will recognise the capacity of this thriving sector, which can play a crucial role in driving national economic growth and sustainable development goals.

The Director General then shed light on how tourism is an important factor towards attaining the SDGs. He said that the SDG adopted by the United Nations in 2015 has provided a comprehensive framework for addressing critical issues such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and economic growth. He noted that tourism has the capacity to impact several SDGs simultaneously. For instance, SDG 8, which promotes sustainable economic growth and decent work for all, can be supported by the thriving tourism sector that generates employment and fosters local entrepreneurship. Furthermore, SDG 12, which stresses on responsible consumption and production also has important link with tourism sector. He said that Bangladesh aims to develop eco-friendly tourism practices that will minimise the ecological footprint. He also pointed out that tourism offers unique opportunities to advance SDG 13 by raising awareness of climate action and investing in green infrastructures that support both economic and environmental sustainability.

He then focused on the challenges that tourism sector faces. One of the foremost obstacles in ensuring tourism growth is that more often than not, it comes at the expense of environment.

Rapid urbanisation, particularly in areas rich in biodiversity, threatens to degrade the ecosystem that attracts tourists. Without careful planning, tourism could exacerbate existing environmental pressures rather than alleviate them. He further underscored that while tourism can drive economic development, it is crucial to ensure that the benefits of this growth are distributed equally.

The Director General then provided some suggestions. He emphasised that it is necessary to take into consideration how local stakeholders can be engaged to become active participants in this process rather than passive observers. He also pointed out that infrastructure is a crucial component in this regard. Bangladesh must invest in a sustainable tourism infrastructure that supports the influx of visitors while protecting natural and cultural heritage sites. This requires not only physical infrastructure, such as transport systems and eco-friendly accommodations, but also digital infrastructure to support the modernisation of tourism services and improve the overall visitor experience. He expressed that this seminar presents a unique platform to delve into these questions.

Informing that the theme of World Tourism Day 2024 is tourism and peace, the Director General hoped that by bringing together diverse perspectives and all the stakeholders, it would be possible to identify innovative solutions that will enable Bangladesh to position tourism as a catalyst for achieving SDGs.

He concluded with the optimism that through collaborative efforts such as the present seminar, a course of action for a sustainable tourism sector can be charted that serves as both an economic driver and a guardian of the national resources.

KEY NOTE PRESENTATION



Mr Abu Sufian

Executive Director, Tourism Research and Development

At the beginning of his keynote presentation, Mr Abu Sufian thanked BISS for organising such a timely seminar. Through his presentation, he tried to demonstrate how tourism can play a significant role in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Bangladesh. In his deliberation, he pointed out that, in the post-COVID era, tourism has gained renewed importance as countries strive to recover from the severe economic downturn caused by the pandemic. The global lockdowns and travel restrictions severely impacted the tourism industry, causing significant income losses and unemployment in several countries, especially those reliant on travel and hospitality. With the gradual reopening of the world, tourism became a pivotal sector for economic reconstruction, rejuvenating local enterprises, and generating employment opportunities. Governments and organisations have prioritised sustainable tourism practices to guarantee long-term resilience, tackling health issues and climatic effects. In this context, tourism emerged as a crucial catalyst for economic recovery, cultural interaction, environmental conservation, and regional development, which aligns with the SDGs.

In terms of Bangladesh's prospects in the tourism industry, Mr Sufian shed light on a report that was published by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). The report anticipated that by the year 2023, the tourism sector in Bangladesh will employ approximately 1.7 million workers, which is approximately 4.2 per cent of the total employment of the nation. Prior to that report, USAID also prepared one report on Bangladesh's potentials regarding tourism and pointed out that the growth of the tourism industry has a direct positive impact on the development of rural communities in Bangladesh.



The speaker subsequently looked at the distinctive characteristics of Bangladesh that render its uniqueness in the tourism sector. Bangladesh is exceptionally conducive to tourism because of its abundant cultural history, varied natural landscapes, and distinctive biodiversity. It presents a diverse array of attractions, including the renowned Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest and habitat of the Bengal tiger, alongside Cox's Bazar, which features the longest uninterrupted sea beach globally. The nation is rich in history, featuring ancient archaeological sites and UNESCO World Heritage sites. Bangladesh's rivers, hills, and tea gardens present picturesque landscapes, while its lively festivals, artisanal crafts, and traditional cuisine deliver enriching cultural experiences. Moreover, its cordial hospitality, expanding infrastructure, and cost-effectiveness render it an appealing destination for both domestic and foreign travellers. He commented that Bangladesh's dedication to eco-tourism and sustainable tourism programmes amplifies its allure, enabling visitors to ethically discover its natural and cultural riches.

Then, he discussed how the tourism sector, through sustainable and inclusive development, can contribute to various SDG targets, including poverty reduction, environmental conservation, and community empowerment. According to him, sustainable tourism development could help in creating decent jobs, particularly for marginalised communities and women, thereby reducing poverty which aligns with SDG 1 titled as "No Poverty". He further argued that, by promoting the rich cultural heritage and biodiversity of Bangladesh, tourism can foster a deeper connection

between local communities and global visitors. In this regard, sustainable tourism ensures that cultural assets are preserved, and local communities benefit directly from tourism-related activities. This idea of promoting cultural heritage aligns well with the SDG 11 of sustainable cities and communities.

Mr Sufian then emphasised the significance of safeguarding the natural environment of Bangladesh, including the Sundarbans, which is among the largest mangrove forests in the world, as well as other environmentally delicate regions. To reduce the negative effects that tourism has on the environment, he suggested that sustainable tourism practices, such as eco-tourism and responsible travel, are absolutely necessary. According to him, upholding the idea of environmental sustainability through tourism will help accomplishing the SDG 13 that deals with climate action and SDG 15 that involves life on earth. Mr Sufian also argued that investment in tourism infrastructure, including roads, airports, and other facilities, can enhance physical connectivity, especially in rural areas, aligning with the broader SDG objective of fostering innovation and resilient infrastructure. The need for improved transport and facilities for tourists was also linked to Bangladesh's growth as a regional tourism hub. This idea of infrastructure development and enhancing connectivity for tourism is in accordance with SDG 9 that reflects on industry, innovation and infrastructure.



Along with prospects of tourism and its significance in attaining SDGs in Bangladesh, Mr Sufian shed light on the obstacles that Bangladesh's tourism sector is facing. He indicated that the tourism sector presently receives no fiscal assistance from the government, such as monetary incentives, tax holidays, or value-added tax (VAT) exemptions. However, there exist certain non-fiscal assistance for the sector, such as the proposal by the Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB) to establish a tourism master plan, and the designation of the sector as a prospective area by the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA). In addition, the tourist and hospitality business suffer from a shortage of competent labour, which in turn reduces the

quality of service. A comprehensive tourism development strategy that is focused on sustainability and competitiveness at global level is required in order to address these difficulties. Additionally, large investments are required, as well as improved regulations. Another significant obstacle he identified is the insufficient infrastructure, which encompasses inadequate transportation facilities, restricted access to outlying tourist sites, and a deficiency of quality accommodations, particularly beyond large urban areas. He further highlighted that inadequate maintenance and management of historical and natural assets diminish the overall tourist experiences. On the other hand, environmental degradation, including coastal pollution and habitat destruction, jeopardies the viability of eco-tourism. Furthermore, the country suffers from inadequate branding and marketing initiatives, which restrict its exposure on the global tourism landscape. Other obstacles include political instability, safety apprehensions, and bureaucratic delays in securing visas and permits. He stressed that to unlock the potential of Bangladesh's tourism sector, these challenges need to be addressed through proper planning, investment in infrastructure, and enhanced governance.

He concluded by reiterating that tourism in Bangladesh has enormous potential to drive progress towards the SDGs if managed sustainably. By aligning tourism development with SDG objectives, and harnessing its cultural, natural, and human resources, Bangladesh can create a more inclusive and environmentally conscious tourism industry.

PANEL DISCUSSION



Dr Sufia Khanom
Senior Research Fellow, BISS

Dr Sufia Khanom deliberated her remarks on “Environmental Sustainability of Tourism in Bangladesh: Issues and Challenges for attaining SDGs”. Through her remarks, she focused on the environmental issues which are very much connected with the tourism sector and are pertinent from both domestic and global perspective. At the outset of her presentation, she tried to define the concept of environmental sustainability. She stated that environmental sustainability refers to the responsible management of natural resources to fulfil current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. It aims to balance ecological, economic and social goals. Then she connected the concept of environmental sustainability with the concept of sustainable tourism. She defined sustainable tourism as a concept that fully takes into account its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, industry, environment and host communities.

Then, she discussed the global perspective of tourism. She said that global tourism is a trillion-dollar business. She informed that the concept of Responsible Tourism evolved in 2002. Tourism industry produces about 8 per cent of total carbon emission and the global hotel industry needs to reduce carbon emissions per room per year by 66 per cent by 2030 and 90 per cent by 2050 to achieve the global target of halting climate change impacts. She showed the global flight routes and pointed out that the United States tops in the carbon footprint followed by China, Germany and India.



Dr Khanom then attempted to analyse the political economy of tourism and the carbon footprint. In this regard, she highlighted that there is a basic difference between ‘net travellers’ and ‘net origins’. Since people from some of the developed countries travel much and produce carbon footprint which is actually contributing the greenhouse gas emissions, difference between these two terms should be taken into consideration before analysing the contribution of carbon footprints in global emission due to tourism. She further highlighted that travel is highly income-elastic and carbon-intensive. Thus, high income tourists consume more processed food than the low income tourists. Therefore, the carbon foot print will increase with the growth of the GDP. She noted that global tourism related emission targets are not under any binding Agreement. On top of that, the United States, the most significant source of tourism emissions, does not support this agreement. She stressed that carbon footprint is an important concern for global tourism.

Dr Sufia, then, discussed two types of tourism – international and domestic. Within the category of domestic tourism, there are different types of tourism in Bangladesh such as heritage tourism, religious tourism, sports tourism, seaside tourism, tea tourism, rural tourism, eco-tourism, culinary tourism, industry tourism and incentive tourism etc. Then, she linked these types of tourism with SDGs and sustainable environment tourism and identified some of the SDG goals that are very much linked with these concepts. For instance, these concepts can be connected

with Goal 6 which is about clean water and sanitation. They also connect with Goal 11 i.e. sustainable cities and communities. The Goal 12 which is about responsible consumption and production align well with these concepts too. Same applies to Goal 13 on climate action which is very much local but has global impact. Additionally, Goal 14 says life below water is very much connected with the concept of sustainable tourism because lots of tourist spots are situated in the coast and the ocean as well. The Goal 15 of life on land is also relevant to the concept.

Regarding the environmental impacts of tourism, Dr Sufia classified some of the impacts. According to her, there are three types of environmental impacts. Firstly, there will be depletion of natural resources for example, the water resources, food and energy, and land because of the tourism activities. Secondly, there will be severe air pollution and sound pollution, solid waste and littering. Thirdly, there are huge physical impacts which can be labelled by two types - the impact of development and the impact of activities. The impact of development includes construction, land use and marine development. On the other hand, the impact of activities includes trampling and anchoring. In this regard, she pointed out the lack of concrete statistics and data as there are no academic study on how much impacts tourism has created in the environment. Nevertheless, she shared some research findings on the waste management in tourist spots which focus on the Cox's Bazar. Those studies found that in Cox's Bazar, around 124 tonnes of waste including plastics need to be removed everyday and about 534 hotels, motels, resorts and cottages built in the Kolatoli Beach do not have the sewage treatment plant. As a result, at times of natural disaster, often messy environment is created. Additionally, there are lots of plastic discharge which goes to the ocean and mix up with the ocean water. Due to this, the micro plastic enters into the food chain which ultimately enters into human body. This plastic discharge creates imbalance in the ecosystem which destroys the ecological balance.

Dr Sufia, then talked about deforestation. Over the years, tourism development has caused deforestation. Regarding this, she shared some statistics spanning over one decade. According to the forest and agriculture related organisations in Bangladesh, forest cover is estimated to be 2.33 million hectares which is about 15.78 per cent of the land whereas the forest department says it is 2.57 million hectares which is about 17.13 per cent of the land. Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has witnessed a concerning loss of 8,390 hectares of humid primary forest accounting for 3.5 per cent of all tree covers. The country saw a significant decrease of 8.7 per cent in the total area of humid primary forest.

In this connection, Dr Khanom discussed the impacts of development projects in Cox's Bazar. By showing two maps - one taken in 2016 and the other in 2024, she demonstrated how the development works caused the depletion of forest resources that is very much visible in Cox's Bazar. Roads were constructed for development purpose and when they were planned, there was no proper planning of restoring forest resources in the affected area. Then, she discussed how Rohingya camps are impacting forestation negatively. Rohingya camps are situated in the reserve forest and there are about 34 camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf. These settlements have destroyed 2,420 acres of forest land. Thus, the camps caused huge environmental loss through various activities including chopped down trees for fire-woods. Experiences in the recent floods in Cox's Bazar also points out lack of proper planning of the coastal city.

Reminding that Bangladesh is a climate vulnerable country, Dr Khanom emphasised on keeping the climate change impacts in focus in any plan or development activities. Since frequent disaster, salinity intrusion and extreme heat or cold weather affects the tourism sector, she suggested planning sustainable tourism in a fashion which takes into account the possible impacts of climate change.

Finally, she gave examples of how tourism is having some positive impacts on environment. Firstly, she mentioned eco-tourism, often referred to as sustainable or responsible tourism, which is a type of travel that aims to minimise the environmental and social impacts of tourism while promoting the conservation of natural resources, biodiversity, and local cultures. It focuses on visiting pristine, often protected areas in ways that benefit the environment, local economies, and communities. As the second example, she talked about use of artificial intelligence (AI) and social media platforms which have very positive impact by playing pivotal roles in promoting sustainable tourism through enabling more efficient resource management, enhancing traveller awareness, and driving responsible tourism practices. Thirdly, she highlighted the critical role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in promoting and supporting sustainable tourism initiatives. By working closely with local communities, governments, and the private sector, CSOs help to create a framework that ensures tourism benefits both in the environment and society. The fourth example of positive side was social forestry, which involves community management and participation in the sustainable use of forest resources and can contribute significantly to sustainable tourism. By blending environmental conservation, economic development, and community empowerment, social forestry strengthens the foundation for eco-tourism. She concluded by emphasising on understanding the sensitivity of the environmental component of tourism.



Dr Munal Mahbub

Director in Charge, Standing Committee on Tourism , FBCCI

Dr Munal Mahbub started her speech with the video of a resort which is eco-friendly. After acknowledging the remarks made by Mr Abu Sufian, she intended to shed light on the challenges of tourism sector in Bangladesh based on her personal experience in this field. She noted that while Bangladesh is rich in natural resources and cultural heritage, similar to many developing nations, it faces the crucial task of aligning economic growth with sustainability goals. Despite having vibrant biodiversity, a rich cultural heritage, and warm hospitality, the country's tourism industry has not yet reached its full potential.

One of the primary reasons for this, she emphasised, is the lack of skilled manpower. She explained that despite the country's huge population and high unemployment, she found managing a project like the one she presented in the beginning of her presentation to be challenging due to the scarcity of properly trained personnel in various sectors. Dr Mahbub also discussed the unique approach taken by the resort owned by her which promotes adventure tourism, focusing on youth engagement. The resort, which is called as a camp, aims to provide holistic knowledge to tourists, ensuring they act responsibly in maintaining the environment and contributing to the society. She elaborated on the diverse programmes offered, catering to

all age groups, from children to the elderly, ensuring inclusive entertainment.

She talked about other challenges faced in the tourism sector, for example, infrastructural issues such as inadequate road connectivity in rural and remote areas. Additionally, she stressed the importance of environmental sustainability, given Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change. While tourism brings income and development opportunities, it also risks damaging ecosystems and biodiversity if not managed sustainably.

To address these challenges, Dr Mahbub mentioned some eco-friendly initiatives at her own resort. However, she pointed out that eco-tourism projects require high maintenance and incur significant costs. She raised concerns about the uniform 15 per cent VAT imposed on all tourism projects, arguing that eco-resorts should not be taxed at the same rate as five-star hotels in urban areas. She called for differentiating the VAT benefitting eco-projects.

Dr Mahbub then described how her resort shows commitment to eco-living. The resort is built using recycled materials and sustainable building techniques, contributing to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). The resort/camp also focuses on local community engagement, supporting SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and involves guests in sustainable agriculture practices, aligning with SDG 13 (Climate Action).



Then she discussed the challenges faced by eco-tourism projects like the one in her resort. She noted that high operating costs, particularly for electricity and taxes, significantly impact the ability to maintain affordable rates for guests. She mentioned that booking platforms take a substantial commission—around 15 per cent—making it difficult to offer budget-friendly options while ensuring the quality and sustainability of the resort. Furthermore, she highlighted the complexities of the regulatory environment, citing the difficulties in obtaining licenses, such as

fire safety certifications, due to restrictive requirements such as minimum road width, which is often unachievable for many businesses in Bangladesh. This makes the cost of projects unrealistic.

She also pointed out the additional burden of high costs for solar batteries, kitchen equipment, and other necessary items. Moreover, many roads around the resorts are government-owned, and widening them for better access is not possible without navigating complex bureaucratic processes. Despite these hurdles, Dr Mahbub reaffirmed her commitment to sustainability. However, she emphasised the need for stronger government cooperation to foster a more environment-friendly tourism. She urged the government to work closely with local businesses by easing tax burdens, improving infrastructure, and offering incentives for green tourism initiatives. This, she believed, would help the entire sector thrive.

Dr Mahbub then referred to the government's tourism master plan, which includes eco-tourism initiatives, and expressed optimism about the potential for growth. She highlighted the increasing interest from international tourists, particularly among non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) worldwide, who may have a renewed interest in the country's environmental platforms. She believes that engaging NRBs in tourism could foster a deeper connection with their homeland, potentially leading to investments and visits, contributing to the sector's growth.



In conclusion, Dr Mahbub stressed that tourism is not just about economic gain—it plays a vital role in creating sustainable livelihoods, preserving natural and cultural heritage, and ensuring a healthier and more prosperous future for the next generation. She expressed her belief that tourism could be the key to achieving environmental sustainability in Bangladesh.



Md Abu Kalam Siddique
DIG, Tourist Police Bangladesh

Md Abu Kalam Siddique delivered a discussion on “Security: The Oxygen of the Tourism Sector”. As a representative of the Tourist Police, he discussed the safety and security aspect of the tourism sector in the country.

Mr Siddique first gave a little context by discussing the history of SDGs. In 2015, world leaders at the United Nations committed to the Universal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which called on all countries to pursue 17 SDGs. This bold agenda aims to create a better future for everyone by addressing issues such as ending extreme poverty, combating inequality and injustice, ensuring security and peace, and tackling climate change by 2030. The 17 SDGs, along with their 169 corresponding targets, offer a clear framework to guide global efforts in achieving sustainable solutions for people, the planet, and prosperity. He said that tourism has the potential to contribute directly and indirectly to many of these goals, particularly Goals 8, 12, and 14; including sustainable economic growth.

Mr Siddique then described the role of Tourist Police. He mentioned that the Tourist Police is committed to ensuring the security of tourism destinations and are constantly working to safeguard these locations. In Cox’s Bazar, special security measures, such as the installation of

CCTV cameras, have been implemented for surveillance at tourist sites. He further informed that there are around 124 destinations where security is provided for tourists (by the Tourist Police). He, however, noted that due to a shortage of manpower, the Tourist Police cannot offer comprehensive security coverage at all locations. Despite receiving numerous requests from the public for increased security at additional destinations, the current capacity is limited to the mentioned 124 locations.

Mr Siddique then drew attention to a unique nature of Bangladesh's tourism. He shared his experience in Kosovo, noting that in many countries, tourists cannot enjoy all seasons due to weather variations. In contrast, he emphasised that Bangladesh offers year-round tourism. Major tourist destinations in Bangladesh, such as Cox's Bazar and Saint Martin, attract tourists throughout the year. Highlighting changes in travel behaviour, he noted the significant influx of domestic tourists to Cox's Bazar, Saint Martin, and other regions during festivals.

Then he delved into the security aspect of tourism. He expressed concern that the security aspect of tourism is often overlooked. He recounted an incident in Sajek Valley where tourists had to be rescued by the Tourist Police, underscoring the importance of safety in tourism. He further noted that Tourist Police lacks authority in certain areas, which limits their ability to fully contribute to the sector. There is no mechanism for them to work together with other entities involved in the tourism sector, which makes their work difficult.

The speaker emphasised that security is the "oxygen" of the tourism sector, and sustainable security is a prerequisite for sustainable development. Without proper security, tourists will avoid going to tourist destinations. He highlighted the improvements in nighttime security in Cox's Bazar, stressing that these changes did not happen overnight. He also referred to the goal of increasing tourism's contribution to 6 per cent of GDP and noted that every sector needs to work efficiently to achieve this target. He then called on the administration to address the shortage of manpower in the Tourist Police, noting that this issue has significantly hindered their ability to protect tourists effectively. To ensure both the safety of tourists and the growth of the sector, he estimated that around 5,000 Tourist Police personnel would be necessary. He mentioned that he had previously communicated this request to the Secretary of Ministry of Public Administration.

The speaker emphasised that Bangladesh has the opportunity to develop its tourism sector to ensure sustainable growth while maintaining peace and justice. He firmly stated that the Tourist Police are committed to protecting and promoting tourist destinations and have gained the trust of tourists by implementing technology-based security measures such as CCTV surveillance. He



also informed the audience about an AI-based software the police were developing which will help them provide better security and surveillance for the tourists. The speaker also pointed out the importance of tourist control to support local biodiversity on the Saint Martin's Island. He mentioned that addressing environmental challenges, particularly reducing polythene waste, is essential for preserving natural heritage and biodiversity in that coral island.



Mr Siddique also explained their proactive policing initiative that involves collaboration with the local community and Community Police to improve security at tourist destinations. By engaging with the public, the goal is to create a safer and more welcoming environment for tourists. He also mentioned his plans for providing a separate zone for foreign tourists where they will be able to enjoy themselves without the scrutiny of inquisitive locals. He hopes this kind of initiative will contribute to the advancement of the tourism sector. He also highlighted the environmental impact of tourism, especially the cutting down of trees. He again stressed the need for the administration to involve the Tourist Police in the whole of tourism sector, saying that they are eager to serve and contribute to society.

He said that sustainable security is a precondition for achieving peace and stability, without which progress cannot be made. Tourist Police play a crucial role in creating a harmonious environment by preventing social, cultural, religious, economic, and environmental violations thus contributing to the tourism sector. Mr Siddique expressed his belief that with a strong focus on security, Bangladesh's tourism sector will continue to grow, eventually making the country a top tourist destination. He added that the seminar is an important step toward that goal. He concluded by saying that the future of sustainable tourism in Bangladesh is promising, if all parties continue with their efforts.

OPEN DISCUSSION



Lt Col Mohammad Shahadat Hossain (Retd)

Lt Col Mohammad Shahadat Hossain shared his experience of coordinating the first Asian Tourism Fair in 2011. The fair, which was held between September 19-21 at the Bashundhara Convention Center, had around 189 stalls and the number of countries participated was 14 and total number of foreign stalls was 42. He expressed his shock that this year the number of stalls was only 100. He further shared that prior to 2011, tourism fair was not in much practice and there was no attendance of foreign stalls in such fairs. Only a few small-scale fairs like the Dhaka Tourism Fair were held in Bashundhara shopping mall or in Hotel Sheraton, which drew a very limited number of participants. Therefore, he took the initiative to consult the organiser of the Dhaka Tourism Fair, Mohiuddin Helal, and offered free services in return for inviting some Chinese stalls in the fair. He mentioned that such a feat was possible only due to their private initiatives, and substantial support from concerned authorities was noticeably absent. Therefore, he suggested that the tourism ministry must provide adequate support for facilitating a second such tourism fair. The ministry and Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) could also work together on publishing a monthly magazine to promote tourism related facilities to the outside world. He also pointed out that the Chinese people constitute 20 per cent of the global tourists, so it would be a great boon to Bangladesh if the country could attract Chinese tourists. For that purpose, a tourism centre can be developed where the foreign tourists can come for proper and comfortable accommodation and other services, which can be facilitated by the BPC. He concluded his remarks by suggesting increased facilities for attracting foreign tourists.

Rear Admiral A S M A Awal, ndc, psc (Retd)

Former Ambassador and
Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, Bangladesh Navy



Rear Admiral A S M A Awal (Retd) made an observation regarding the presentation of Dr Sufia Khanom. He observed that in the presentation, SDG targets 6, 11, 12, 13, and 14 were mentioned, but SDG 8 which is considered very important was notably absent. He sought clarification regarding exclusion of SDG 8.

He stated that though Dr Sufia Khanom's warning is unsettling, it is reflective of the real scenario. He emphasised on the need for immediate planning for the future. He referred to various organisations that aim to support tourism in the future. He particularly noted that Turkey had become the first country to sign a contract for an environmental certification that could lead to the closure of tourist spots in order to ensure sustainability. To avoid this, he stressed on planning on tourism on an urgent basis.

Another key issue addressed by him was the condition of Saint Martin's Island, where certain restrictions are reportedly being imposed. He suggested that an ecological and environmental audit of the island would reveal that it should have been closed to tourism much earlier. He recommended taking steps immediately to protect Saint Martin's Island, the only coral island in Bangladesh. Additionally, he drew attention to the existence of 75 other islands with *Nijhum Dwip* mentioned as a potential site for further study. He proposed to consider alternative islands as options for tourism development.

He highlighted the prospects of the Chattogram Hill Tracts for tourism development especially given the challenges faced in coastal areas. He suggested that while it may be difficult to restrict people from visiting coastal zones, the Chattogram Hill Tracts might become an exclusive zone with the potential for tourism development, which could, in turn, address some of the existing problems. He further stressed that if properly developed, Chattogram could emerge as an excellent option for tourism.



Shamsheer M Chowdhury, BB

Former Foreign Secretary,
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Shamsheer M Chowdhury noted that Bangladesh is primarily and overwhelmingly dependent on domestic tourism where foreign tourism remains very limited. Due to limited participation of foreign tourists, the country is unable to earn foreign exchange from domestic tourism. Though domestic tourism generates employment, it cannot earn foreign exchange.

In the context of SDGs, he emphasised that consideration should be given to how tourism contributes to achieve these goals. Regarding the expansion of tourism sites, he pointed out that while the government does not generate foreign exchange from tourism, heavy taxes are imposed, presenting a major contradiction in government policy that should be addressed. He suggested that a special taxation structure or arrangements should be created specifically for the tourism industry.

He further observed that certain areas in Bangladesh are under-explored and under-recognised, with Netrokona mentioned as an untapped tourism destination of great magnificence.

Additionally, he suggested to the DIG that a special division of tourist police with a large force should be established. To ensure safety, he suggested deploying a 24/7 service system by the police as their role is significant in making tourism secure.

Rear Admiral (Retd) Md Khurshed Alam
Former Secretary (Maritime Affairs Unit)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh



Rear Admiral (Retd) Md Khurshed Alam noted that the tourism industry is flourishing globally, with a 7.5 per cent annual growth rate. However, in Bangladesh neither coastal tourism nor cruise tourism has been developed. In the over 50 years since independence only one cruise ship, Silver Discoverer brought foreign tourists to Bangladesh in 2017.

He highlighted that while bringing a cruise ship to Bangladesh, significant obstacles were encountered including the need for approvals from 14 different ministries and most notably visa issues. Unlike countries like Sri Lanka, where visa arrangements are more streamlined, Bangladesh lacks an efficient visa-on-arrival system for tourists arriving by ship. This deficiency remains unresolved.

Another important issue raised by him was beach security, particularly in swimming areas. In many western countries, natural barriers made of wire or other materials are installed in front of hotels to prevent swimmers from being pulled far out into the water. Despite discussions with the Parjatan Corporation and the relevant ministry seven or eight years ago, no changes have been made and lives continue to be lost every year in the beach spots in Bangladesh.

He further suggested that other tourist spots such as Kuakata should be explored and better organised with beach security measures. Development efforts should be taken to enhance the country's tourist destinations. He emphasised security as a necessity to ensure that foreign tourists feel safe when visiting these areas. He concluded by noting that if safety concerns are addressed and foreign tourists are attracted, the tourism sector of Bangladesh would see greater benefits.



Syed Ghulam Qadir

CEO, Adventure Escape Asia, Dhaka

Syed Ghulam Qadir observed that while discussions are focused on SDG goals, the approach to tourism development in Bangladesh is not being adequately addressed. Several sensitive locations such as Saint Martin's Island, the Sundarbans, Ratargul Swamp Forest, and Tanguar Haor are under threat and are expected to be affected soon. These natural areas are valuable assets of Bangladesh and greater attention should be given towards them. Tourism in these locations should be regulated.

He continued that since Bangladesh is a densely populated country, if tourism is not regulated in specific areas, many of its important tourist spots could be lost and potentially destroyed. He expressed his concern as a plea to all relevant stakeholders.

He further observed that although Bangladesh is often regarded as one of the most hospitable nations, when compared to other destinations in the subcontinent, Bangladesh has currently become more expensive place to visit than others. He stressed that this issue should be examined to make the country more tourist-friendly and to attract more international tourists as the current focus on domestic tourism alone is not expected to be beneficial.



Mofizur Rahman

Managing Director,
NOVOAIR

Mofizur Rahman emphasised that the focus should be on promoting sensible tourism. He gave an example of tourism mismanagement referring to Jafong which was once a serene and beloved destination. However, it has been severely affected by the presence of over 200 stone-crushing machines making it an unappealing location for tourists.

He drew attention to how Rohingya camps are contributing to the destruction of forests and made a comparison with Sajek. Once Sajek was a wonderful destination. Now being covered with red-colored tin roofs, Sajek has lost much of its original charm. Similar is the case with Kutupalong which is now covered with tin-shed roofs. Both areas which were once beautiful natural sites for tourism have been largely destroyed, he commented. This, he emphasised, highlights the urgent need for sensible tourism which should be actively pursued.

He further noted that tourism in Bangladesh has become overly focused on seminars, with much discussion but little action. Being part of the industry for 20 years, he observed that the same problems and prospects continue to be discussed without solution. In order to truly harness the potential of the tourism sector, concrete action must be taken, he stressed.

He drew attention of the Secretary of the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism to one critical issue: Cox's Bazar's Marine Drive was intended to provide a scenic route along the coast but due to forest development along the coastline, views of the sea have been obstructed. Additionally, it was regrettably noted that the coastal lands along the highway have fallen under the control of land grabbers and big companies. This situation calls for urgent intervention and the promotion of sensible tourism should be prioritised to prevent further degradation of natural sites.



Shiblul Azam Koreshi

Former President,
The Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB)

Shiblul Azam Koreshi emphasised on the importance of sustainable tourism practices, noting that responsible usage allows for long-term benefits without causing harm to the environment, ensuring future generations can also enjoy these resources. To achieve this, he stressed the need for adhering to proper regulations and promoting widespread public awareness. Mr Koreshi urged the government and media to actively publicise these guidelines at no cost, emphasising that such initiatives are crucial for protecting valuable resources.

He also put forward a suggestion to the Foreign Advisor, recommending that embassies can be utilised as a platform to promote tourism. Furthermore, he proposed the creation of specialised roles, such as a Commercial and Tourism Counsellor or a Visa and Tourism Counsellor, to assign specific responsibilities related to tourism promotion. He believes this approach would greatly benefit the country's tourism sector. While tourism in Bangladesh has grown, Mr Koreshi highlighted the need to attract more foreign visitors.



Mr Bilal Ahmad
Second Secretary (Cultural),
High Commission of Pakistan in Bangladesh

Mr Bilal Ahmad informed that Pakistan recently announced a revised visa policy for 126 countries including Bangladesh. Under this new arrangement, the visa fee has been waived, and a “prior-to-arrival” visa category has been introduced. He acknowledged the environmental challenges linked to tourism, as mentioned by other panellists, and suggested that while there is currently no mutually agreed international framework, such policies could help mitigate the adverse effects of tourism on the environment.



Ashrafuzzaman Ujjal
President,
Bangladesh Travel Writers Association

Ashrafuzzaman Ujjal, who has cycled across six continents, shared his vision for enhancing Bangladesh’s tourism sector. Drawing inspiration from Chile, he proposed the development of an app that would allow citizens to contribute ideas for solving tourism-related challenges. In Chile, participants are rewarded with honorary citizenship and a cash prize of US\$ 40,000 for their suggestions. Mr Ujjal believes a similar initiative in Bangladesh could greatly benefit the sector.

He also appealed to the Foreign Advisor, pointing out that Bangladesh boasts 80 key tourist destinations. Although there is a programme called “Visit Bangladesh” which invites foreign journalists and photographers, it predominantly showcases development projects rather than the country’s natural beauty. He suggested creating a book that collects travel stories from Bangladesh, which could be distributed through embassies. According to Mr Ujjal, foreign narratives of Bangladeshi tourism could be highly influential in promoting the country’s attractions. He proposed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) assist in compiling and publishing these stories.

SPEECH BY THE SPECIAL GUEST



Nasreen Jahan

Secretary, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Nasreen Jahan started her deliberation by acknowledging that the issues raised by the speakers and participants were vast and complex. She said that she wanted to share her thoughts, particularly from the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism perspective, which focuses heavily on tourism development.

Ms Jahan said that the SDGs consist of 17 objectives and the Ministry directly addresses Goals 8, 12, and 14. Goal 8, she explained, emphasises policy formulation, implementation, and employment generation. Goal 12 focuses on sustainable ecotourism and broad societal participation, while Goal 14 deals with the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas, and marine resources. She further explained that while these goals were central to the ministry's efforts, other SDGs were also relevant to their work.



The secretary then stated that, based on the day's discussions, she had realised the need for short, medium, and long-term plans. She emphasised the importance of taking immediate actions to achieve short-term goals with public support, while also planning for the medium and long-term. She mentioned her intention to consult with the Tourism Board, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, and the Tourist Police to quickly address safety and security issues in the tourism sector within the short term. She highlighted the celebration of World Tourism Day on September 27, during which Bangladesh also observed the occasion. At that time, the Senior Secretary of the Ministry of Public Administration had been present, and they had agreed to form a committee to address pressing issues in the sector and make recommendations including short-term policy options for future action.

Ms Jahan added that according to the keynote speaker, the tourism sector's contribution to GDP might be much higher than the estimate of 3.02 per cent made by the Tourism Satellite Account (TSA), and she intended to investigate this matter. She also noted that another panellist stressed the importance of presenting immediate solutions to tourism challenges, which she found to be a praiseworthy approach. Additionally, she recalled watching a video about eco-tourism, which emphasised the importance of staying close to nature and sustainable development. Then, she mentioned that one speaker in the open discussion session had noted that remittances from tourism were lower but the tax revenues and financial contributions from tourism, especially in attracting foreign investors, were significant.

She mentioned her experience of working in Dubai when the current foreign advisor was the Foreign Secretary, acknowledging Dubai's success as a global tourism hub. The secretary said that she is not a dreamer but expressed her commitment to making tangible contributions to the tourism sector pragmatically. She noted that addressing tourism challenges cannot be done by the government alone but requires collaboration between the public and private sectors. She planned to meet with all relevant stakeholders working in the tourism sector to ensure a collective approach to overcome challenges.





The secretary then answered a few questions raised by the floor. Referring to a question raised by the representative from the High Commission of Pakistan in Bangladesh regarding visa-free entry, she said that this question would be best addressed by the honourable Foreign Adviser. She mentioned that Bangladesh already has a fairly liberal visa policy, though she acknowledged that there is still much more to be done. She went on to say that the issue of visas, particularly about the Commerce and Tourism Wing of the mission, was brought up as a suggestion. However, she explained that this matter also falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Commerce, and the commercial counsellor would need to look into it collectively with the relevant stakeholders. Ms Jahan then concluded her speech by thanking the audience.

SPEECH BY THE CHIEF GUEST



Mr Md Touhid Hossain

Honourable Adviser, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Mr Md Touhid Hossain began his speech by expressing reverence for the martyrs of the student-people revolution against fascism in July and August, as well as the 3 million martyrs and 2 lakh women who suffered during the War of Liberation in 1971. He thanked BISS for organising the seminar on “Tourism for Attaining SDGs: Challenges and Prospects for Bangladesh” and congratulated the panel of speakers for their insightful discussion on the topic.

He emphasised the need for a coordinated effort to develop Bangladesh’s tourism sector, highlighting the importance of simplifying visa processes over making them free of charge. He noted that tourism, being one of the fastest-growing economic sectors globally, is recognised for its contributions to job creation, wealth generation, economic growth, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation. A well-managed tourism industry, he said, could preserve natural and cultural heritage, empower host communities, foster trade opportunities, and

promote peace and intercultural understanding. However, Mr Hossain acknowledged that the growing number of international and domestic travellers bring challenges such as greenhouse gas emissions, resource management, and impacts on local communities. To harness tourism's positive contributions while mitigating its adverse effects, he called for strong partnerships and decisive actions from all stakeholders.

Mr Hossain pointed out that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises the critical role of tourism, citing its mention in three SDGs—SDG 14 for Life Below Water, SDG 8 for Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 12 for Responsible Consumption and Production. He added that tourism also contributes to other goals such as poverty eradication, gender equality, and environmental protection. Given the sector's wide-ranging links with other industries, it has the potential to accelerate progress towards all 17 SDGs and foster a culture of sustainability and peace.



Mr Hossain then stressed the importance of the private sector and financing in building a sustainable tourism industry. He noted that long-term competitiveness depends on managing industry vulnerabilities and investing in new markets like ecotourism, which is valued at US\$ 100 billion annually. He urged policymakers to create supportive frameworks and offer incentives to strengthen SDG engagement from the private sector. He highlighted the need to provide small and medium enterprises with knowledge, capacity, and access to new technologies for greener business practices. Where voluntary action is insufficient, the public sector, he argued, should set clear targets, policies, and incentives to support sustainable tourism and innovation.

For advancing tourism's role in the SDGs, Mr Hossain stated that, it requires political will, private sector commitment, and improved financing frameworks. He mentioned that multilateral development banks and donor countries increasingly recognise tourism's role in sustainable development, supporting developing nations with investments and technical assistance. He called for scaling up resource mobilisation and public finance for tourism, emphasising that it must become a priority sector for sustainable development.

Mr Hossain further noted Bangladesh's wealth of tourism resources, including forests, beaches, wildlife, cultural heritage, and festivals, which attract both domestic and international tourists. He argued that cultural tourism supports heritage preservation and fosters community pride, contributing to SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. Sustainable tourism, he added, also helps preserve natural resources and biodiversity, aligning with SDG 13: Climate Action and SDG 15: Life on Land. He cited the Sundarbans as an example of a site that could be promoted as a sustainable tourism destination.

In a fragmented world filled with conflicts, and mistrust, Mr Hossain reflected on tourism's potential for peacebuilding. Tourism, he said, provides visible benefits by creating jobs, boosting local economies, and conserving cultural assets. However, its intangible role as a social force for peace is often overlooked. He noted that tourism fosters cultural exposure, tolerance, and respect, dispelling preconceived notions through people-to-people contact. He pointed out that in regions like South Asia, where mutual mistrust and conflicts persist, tourism could play a vital role in reconciliation and conflict resolution.

Mr Hossain concluded by acknowledging Bangladesh's unique environmental and cultural strengths, which could be leveraged for sustainable tourism. While tourism has the potential to generate employment and community entrepreneurship, he warned that political instability, poor infrastructure, and inadequate marketing could hinder its growth. Unplanned tourism, he noted, poses threats to both the natural and socio-cultural environments. These challenges, however, could be addressed through security measures, planning, environmental legislation, education, and infrastructure development. He called for continuous monitoring and a comprehensive national tourism policy aligned with SDGs, with local communities involved in decision-making processes, ensuring tourism's contribution to Bangladesh's progress toward sustainable development.

CONCLUDING REMARKS



Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker
Chairman, BISS

Ambassador AFM Gousal Azam Sarker began his address by greeting the guests present in the seminar. He highlighted the importance of tourism for Bangladesh in attaining the SDGs and economic development. Tourism, according to him, is a potential “mega sector” that would boost employment rate, industrial diversification, multiply services growth, and make Bangladesh’s local products and services better known to the world. Tourism can also support a host of other sectors, and help Bangladesh acquire foreign currency without having to draw from the delicate foreign exchange reserves. He strongly emphasised that more than ever before, tourism requires serious and urgent attention now, the primary reason being Bangladesh is one of the 30 most attractive tourist destinations in the world. Considering the international media attention Bangladesh has received in light of the July movement, it is the perfect opportunity to promote Bangladeshi tourism before the international community, he opined. He expressed high hopes that the seminar would prove fruitful in yielding insights and analysis that would help the policymakers and authorities move forward with this very prospective sector for Bangladesh.

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