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Tourism policy planning in Bangladesh: Background and some steps forward

Tourism policy provides the overall direction to a country's tourism development (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2009). It also provides an overall framework within which a country's private and public sector work together to achieve its tourism policy objectives. National tourism policy objectives help focus on enabling tourism to achieve the social and economic development needs of the county such as employment generation, foreign exchange earnings, development of marginal and disadvantaged communities, overall economic development and sustainability.

Policy planning as a process is typically led by current development needs and in response to changes in the external and internal environments. Tourism policies and plans seek to resolve tourism development issues, safeguard the built and natural heritage, and achieve sustainable socioeconomic development in relation to the aspirations of current and future generations (Edgell & Swanson, 2013). However, performance of the tourism sector depends on various factors such as the policy formulation capacities of a country with the active involvements of key stakeholders. This conceptual research critically outlines dynamics of national tourism policy formulation with special reference to Bangladesh. This study is based on data and information on Bangladesh tourism from online resources and existing literature.

Bangladesh as an emerging economy, arguably, possesses considerable potential in tourism to diversify, promote and thus attract tourists from other parts of the world. Before 1992, Bangladesh had no official tourism policy. A Strategic Master Plan for tourism development prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) came in effect in 1990. The first set of tourism policies was formulated by the government in 1992. Continuing with the process and to tap the growing the global tourism demand, the government adopted an updated tourism policy in 2009. The Bangladesh National Tourism Policy came in to force on the 14th December, 2009. The governmental agencies responsible for implementing the policy are the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and Bangladesh Tourism Board as the National Tourism Organization (NTO). The updated tourism policies of Bangladesh are generally viewed as comprehensive with goals, objectives, policy instruments, implementation programmes and evaluation tactics. The 'National Tourism Policy 2009' has 31 objectives and goals with brief action plans. Yet another tourism policy was published in 2010 that had 30 clearly defined objectives aiming to attain a comprehensively developed tourism industry in Bangladesh.

A very basic criticism of the policy relates to its non-availability in Bengali language (Hassan & Burns, 2014). Even though a Bengali version was available, it keeps disappearing from the website of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation on a regular basis due to technical glitches (Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, 2015a). It is important for a country such as Bangladesh, where the use of English language is limited to a minority that a vernacular version of the tourism policy is made available for its more effective dissemination. A complete and detailed version of the 'Draft National Tourism Policy 2010' is also missing on the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation website. Secondly, it is very rare to find governments to publish tourism policies on an annual basis. Formulating tourism

policies do take time and their implementation also require longer time frame. However, Bangladesh has managed to announce tourism policies in 2009 and 2010.

It is very unlikely that Bangladesh can formulate robust national tourism policies in two consecutive years. This can only lead to confusion and indicate the haphazard approach to tourism policy, which is one of the most important components of tourism development process. The tourism policy available on the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (NTC) website is also confusing. The caption of 'National Tourism Policy 2009' actually shows the tourism policies of 1992 (Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, 2015). Further, Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and Bangladesh Tourism Board both appear to be unable to provide updated statistical data on their official websites or in their various reports.

Lack of access to the current tourism policy and tourism data can create confusion among various stakeholders, both international and domestic. Availability of a clearly formulated tourism policy and authentic data are essential to create a sense of seriousness and trust in Bangladesh tourism in general and the government tourism organisations in particular. International tourism businesses and markets will need to be convinced about how serious and capable the Bangladeshis tourism sector is and minor steps such as publication of a clearly formulated tourism policy and credible tourism data can help demonstrate these.

It is encouraging to note that the Bangladesh government has begun to realise the importance of translating the much talked about tourism potential of Bangladesh to a reality. The declaration of tourism as a thrust sector in the Industrial Policy of Bangladesh - 1999 is an indication of this recognition. However, it took almost ten years for this declaration to materialise as the Bangladesh Tourism Board Bill 2010 and the Bangladeshi Protected Tourism Area and Special Tourism Zone Bill 2010 (Ministry to Tourism and Civil Aviation, 2015b). These should enhance the legislative and institutional capacities of the tourism sector. Bangladesh Tourism Board was formed by enacting the National Tourism Policy-

2010 and Bangladesh Tourism Board Act- 2010 and as the National Tourism Organization (NTO) was clearly assigned with responsibilities for comprehensive tourism development and tourism marketing (Bangladesh Tourism Board, 2015). This is a notable development considering the ineffectiveness of the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, which was set up in 1973 but never managed to carry out the responsibilities of an NTO. However, formulation of a comprehensive tourism policy that can help the tourism sector in Bangladesh to tap its tourism potential to make meaningful contribution to the socio-economic development of a country.

The process of policy formulations at the national level requires expertise in policy-making, clear knowledge of developments in the global tourism industry and more importantly a strong political commitment. A combination of theoretical and thematic soundness along with grounding in the realities of the present and future challenges is the feature of an effective set of tourism policies. Also, existence of a tourism policy that recognises the importance of tourists, tourism trade, investors, and interest groups enhances and reinforces the credibility and attractiveness of a tourist destination. Lack of such a tourism policy normally results in insufficient knowledge about the present state of and attitudes towards and future directions for tourism in the destination.

However, policy-makers and planners in Bangladesh tourism seem oblivious to this and the resultant limitations and constraints that a lack of well-formulated tourism policy can create to tourism development in the country. Still this in fact reflects the fact that in a country like Bangladesh where the state commitment to tourism development is limited, the organisational and professional capacity development for tourism receives very little or no support in terms of financial and political resources. Tourism policies need to be informed by social, political and economic data and global trends in tourism, and competence is in analysing and applying these important variables to the tourism policy is vital for their

relevance and effectiveness. In the absence of these data the tourism policy would not be evidence-based and will be weak and inaccurate in its prediction of the future scenarios for both global and national tourism.

The process of policy formulations requires in depth research and sufficient funding along with participation of multiple stakeholders. However, the situation in Bangladesh tourism is quite mixed that while there is healthy interest from private sector to invest in tourism, due to political indifference and corruption government seems lackadaisical in its welcome of eager private sector entrepreneurs. Again, even though there are plenty of tourism resources, government appears ambiguous in its attitude towards such an economically important sector such as tourism, not only in prioritising it as a vital sector of the national economy but in developing and implementing effective tourism policies. Tourism policies and plans that are not grounded on evidence and supported by a government and political will can only lead to confusion and complexities (Fayos-Solá, 1996), which is a reflection of the current state of tourism policy and planning in Bangladesh.

A sound policy framework is always required for the systematic growth of any sector and policy formulations at the national level have to be based on realities in the macro and micro environment. With an economy that is dependent on financial support from international donors, policy making in Bangladesh tend to be heavily influenced by the agenda set by international donor agencies. Such policies may fail to address the real development issues and day to day livelihood problems of Bangladeshi citizens and will be deemed effective on the extent to which they conform to the agenda of donor agencies. Policies developed according to the agenda set by international donors and other vested interests often become counterproductive and fail to address development problems that need policy solutions based on the ground realities. National interests often become secondary to the worldview of the donors and tourism is no exception (Brohman, 1996; Cater, 1993).

National tourism policies need to reflect local realities and value systems. Bangladesh, with its natural and cultural resources, has immense potential for tourism development, and tourism can offer effective solutions to address some of the major social and economic problems of the country such as unemployment, and development of marginal regions and infrastructure. Bangladesh has major development issues in areas of unemployment, unsatisfactory economic well-being of the majority of the population, unfavourable long-term economic trends and ineffective planning, non-inclusive growth patterns, poor governance, red tape, severe environmental problems and a low-wage economy (Economist, 2012; World Bank, 2010). As one of the lowest wage economies in the world, Bangladesh should have experienced higher growth rate than some of its neighbours. With frequent occurrences of floods, Bangladesh is clearly a victim of the climate change.

The manufacturing sector is heavily reliant on the ready-made garment industry, which is one of the lowest paid industry in the world. Bangladesh's tourism policies need to take these realities on board and focus on developing tourism ways that it can address some of the pressing problems confronting the country. Political commitment to develop such a form of tourism is essential. However, the government alone cannot make this happen without the involvement of the private and voluntary sector, which has a major presence in the Bangladeshi society. Sustainability, development of authentic tourism products, generation of quality employment, human resource development for tourism, increased stakeholder participation, decentralised tourism development that can distribute tourism's benefits to economically marginal regions, improvement of infrastructure that can also help tackle problems of climate change are areas that require attention from the tourism policy-makers in Bangladesh.

This study indicates the pressing need for Bangladesh tourism to formulate policies that are evidence led and reflecting the ground realities of tourism, and development needs of

the country. To begin with, there needs to be government's commitment to a policy-driven tourism development in the country with active participation of the private sector and voluntary organisations. Secondly, Bangladesh needs to improve its capacity for human resource development for tourism, which is essential not only to improve professionalism and service standards, but to develop competence for tourism policy-making, planning and management. Policy initiatives are required to improve institutional capacity and developing a culture of research, which can help the Bangladesh tourism industry to be abreast of the contemporary developments and emerging trends in the global tourism. Thirdly, public and private sector investments in tourism infrastructure and services need to be encouraged. Entrepreneurship development and innovation need to be an important priority area for Bangladesh tourism policy. Fourthly, sustainability and security issues have to be given their due importance. Zoning system in ecologically fragile areas, creation of a 'Tourist Safety Force' as part of the national law enforcement agencies are important measures that can help enhance sustainability and security of Bangladesh tourism. Finally, capacity and resources to implement tourism policies effectively are as important as good quality tourism policies. Bangladesh tourism has to create organisational, personnel, financial and political resources to ensure effective implementation and evaluation of tourism policies.

This study has critically analysed the tourism policy context of Bangladesh and a number of policy initiatives emerge as essential for the sustainable development of Bangladesh tourism in days to come. There needs to be a radical improvement in the marketing and branding of Bangladesh tourism to help Bangladesh compete with its regional and international rivals. In countries that have a relatively less developed tourism sector, government tourism organisations have a very important role in initiating and guiding the development of tourism. Agencies such as Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and Bangladesh Tourism Board need to be strengthened with financial, personnel and political support.

Collaboration and partnership between various stakeholders are vital for the sustainable development of a multi-sector industry such as tourism. It is thus important for Bangladesh tourism to facilitate collaboration and partnership between government organisations, industry associations such as the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB), Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh and National Hotel Association of Bangladesh (NHAB), and organisations in the voluntary sector. Efficient tourism facilitation is vital to improve the ease with which tourists can travel to and within Bangladesh. Simplification of visa and currency exchange facilities is essential to achieve this.

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh has unique tourism resources and has the potential to develop tourism as an important means for its social and economic development. Sound and evidence-led tourism policies and political support along with participation of the private and voluntary sector are essential for Bangladesh to become a successful and sustainable tourism destination. Also, the direct contribution of travel and tourism to the Bangladesh Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is forecast to grow by 2.0% pa by 2025 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2015). Bangladesh needs to formulate and implement policies to take advantages of these potentials. A shortage of detailed information and severe lack of research on tourism in Bangladesh are major constraints for this study. However, there is a felt need for further research on tourism policy, planning and management of Bangladesh tourism to develop a knowledge base and identify constraints and opportunities for its successful and sustainable development.

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