

An Insight of Tourism Opportunity in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Paharpur Buddhist Bihara

Md. Rifat-Ur-Rahman*
Sharmin Nahar Nipa**

Abstract

Bangladesh has plenty of opportunities of becoming a tourist nation, as it has rich archaeological, natural, ecological and other tourism sites to attract tourists. The country has many heritage sites, and among them, two locations are recognized as the World Cultural Heritage Sites e.g. Paharpur Buddhist Bihara and Bagerhat Sixty Dome Mosque. On the other hand, we have Early Historical Archaeological Sites; such as Wari-Batweshar, Mahasthangarh, etc. These Archaeological sites and the colourful lifestyle of the country have significantly enriched the entire cultural scenario of Bangladesh. Moreover, these sites also have full of prospects to improve the tourism sector of Bangladesh. In this context, it is necessary to promote tourism areas to enrich the tourism business of the country. In this paper, researchers have chosen Paharpur Buddhist Bihara which is declared as World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO to re-explore its universal and tourism value, identify the mismanagement issues to solve such problems and promote this site as Tourist Destination to earn more revenue.

Keywords: *Tourism, World Cultural Heritage Site, Paharpur Buddhist Bihara*

Introduction

Tourism is a composite of activities, services, and industries that deliver a travel experience to individuals and groups traveling from their homes for purposes of pleasure. The business sectors comprising the tourism industry include transportation, accommodations, eating and drinking establishments, shops, entertainment venues, activity facilities, and a variety of hospitality service providers who cater to individuals or groups traveling away from home (Cohen 2001: 181).

* Senior Lecturer, Department of Bangladesh Studies, Stamford University Bangladesh

** Lecturer, Center for Climate Change and Environmental Research (C3ER), BRAC University

In Bangladesh, the 'Tourism Sector' is still mistreated whereas it is one of the leading sectors as a source of income of India (Bhatia 2012: 35). Like India, many other countries of the world are emphasizing to conserve and preserve both their cultural and natural heritage sites to attract the tourists. However, different Archaeological Sites of the country, i.e. Paharpur Buddhist Bihara and Bagerhat Sixty Dome Mosque, Wari-Batweshar, Mahasthangarh, Mainamati Buddhist Bihara, Vikrampur Buddhist Bihara, etc. have plenty of opportunities regarding tourism business. In this paper, Paharpur Buddhist Bihara was selected as a study area which is one of the famous tourist sites in Bangladesh and already declared as World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO. The primary objective of this paper is to focus on the tourism opportunity as well as to look at the mismanagement issues of this historical heritage site of the country.

Literature Review

Mathieson and Wall (1982) created a good working definition of tourism as "the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs" (Mathieson and Wall 1982: 35).

According to Macintosh and Goeldner (1986) tourism is "the sum of the phenomena and relationships arising from the interaction of tourists, business suppliers, host governments and host communities in the process of attracting and hosting these tourists and other visitors" (Macintosh and Goeldner, 1986: 75).

The Paharpur monastery is a historic monument owned by the Govt. of Bangladesh. The archaeological evidences indicate that the *Vajrayana* Buddhism was practiced in Bangladesh from the 7th century onwards, and it was a renowned intellectual centre in the Buddhist world until the 12th century. The Paharpur monastery was built by the Pala Emperor Dharmapala (*ca.* 770-810 AD). During the Pala period many Buddhist temples, monasteries and *stupas* were built under the royal patronage and Bengal became the center of Buddhist religion and culture. Paharpur Buddhist Bihara is also known as Somapura Mahavihara which was one of such institutions. In the last quarter of the 9th century AD the Pala Empire received a major setback by foreign invaders. However, Mahipala I was able to establish the second Pala Empire in the end of the 10th century AD and restored many Buddhist establishments in the country including Somapura Mahavihara. After Mahipala I and his son Navapala, the fortune of Pala dynasty again suffered reverse and Bengal was overrun in turn by the foreign invaders and a local Kaivarta chief named Divya and the Somapura Vihara was burnt by the Vangala army. In the last quarter of the 11th century the Pala dynasty was reestablished but in the 12th century the sovereignty of Bengal passed over to the Senas of South India, and the monuments at Paharpur suffered decline and disintegration never to be revived again.

The Buddhist Bihara of Paharpur was declared as 121st World Cultural Heritage by the Executive Board of UNESCO in Paris on 13th June 1985. It was a renowned seat of Buddhist theological practices and research, especially *Vajrayana* ritual. Hence historically famous teachers like Sriyanana Atish Dipankar, Ratnakara Santi and others stayed here for couple of years. The teachers of this monastery preached Buddhism in China and even in Sri Lanka (Singh 1982: 50). Therefore, the monastery is not the property of Bangladesh alone rather of the whole international community.

Study Area

Under this study, Paharpur Buddhist Bihara was selected as a study area which is located at Paharpur, a small village of Paharpur Union of Badalgachi Upazila under the district of Naogaon in the north-west part of Bangladesh. It is 5 km west of Jamalganj Railway Station, 14 km of Jaypurhat, and 25 km north of Naogaon district headquarters. It was visited and described by Buchanan Hamilton as early as 1807-12, Westmacott in 1875, and Sir Alexander Cunningham, the then Director General of Archaeological Survey of India, in 1879. Cunningham intended to carry out an excavation in the mound but was prevented by the Zamindar of Balihar, the owner of the land. So, he had to be satisfied with a limited excavation in a small part of the monastic area and at the top of the central mound only, however unveiled the ruins of a square tower of 6.7m side with a projection in the middle of each side. Consequently the site was placed on the list of protected monuments by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1919 under the provisions of Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904 (Zakaria 1984: 23).

Research Methodology

Both the primary and secondary data were collected to re-explore an insight of tourism opportunities of Bangladesh, especially on the Paharpur Buddhist Bihara. For this, an extensive literature review was carried out to understand the value of World Cultural Heritage Sites of the country and their role or prospects in the tourism sector. Moreover, Key Informant Interview (KII) with the Government Officials, teachers, students and the local peoples were conducted to identify the mismanagement of the study area and also to assemble their recommendation to enrich the tourism facilities for the domestic and overseas tourists.

Aesthetic, Architectural and Artistic Value

The Paharpur Monastery complex is a unique architectural structure which has profound aesthetical and artistic value. It consists of a colossal temple of a cross-shaped floor plan in the centre of the courtyard and with an elaborate gateway on the north. This feature influenced the Buddhist architecture in Cambodia and Java (Indonesia). The architectural remains of Paharpur represent the most spectacular and magnificent monument in Bangladesh and the single largest Buddhist monastery south of the Himalayans (Zakaria 1984: 52). The 3 tier walls of the central shrine decorated with terracotta plaques. It is highly impressive. Even the subject matter of the scenery depicted in its terracotta plaques was of diverse orders, i.e., folk, everyday life, religious, economic, flora, fauna, etc. Some of the scenery was also associated with *Saiva*, *Trantic*, *Laukalisha* and *Krisna* cults. It yielded 63 stone sculptures and minor artifacts also (Singh 1982: 44).



Figure 1: Pharpur Buddhist Bihara(Source: Oitihya Onweshan 2012)

Tourism Value

As the Paharpur World Heritage site is an important tourism site of the country, a different group of people regularly visits the place all the year round. It is explored that, during the ‘Peak Season’ (October to April) the number of visitors is around thousand people per day. Around 200 to 300 people visited the place during the ‘Off Season’ which starts from May to September. According to the report of Department of Archaeology, the visitor’s rate is in increasing trend. Usually, two types of visitors (Table 1), i.e. local peoples or natives and foreigners from different age and professional groups like farmers, businessmen, housewives, schoolchildren, a schoolteacher, college, university students, Government organizations and Non-Government Organization (NGO) professionals, researchers, etc. visits the sites. Moreover, many students from different disciplines like Archaeology, History, Architecture, Fine Arts, Iconography, Art History, Islamic History, and Culture, etc. repeatedly conduct their study tours at Paharpur World Heritage Site (PWHS) for research purposes. Therefore, PWHS represents itself as an open-air museum for the students over the years. This site is also frequently used as a venue for various workshops and seminars on conservation, site management, and tourism. Consequently, the Government of Bangladesh earns a good amount of money or can earn huge amount of revenue from this tourism site. During the field survey, the local people (small businessman, shopkeepers, and hawkers, etc.) also revealed that their livelihood sustenance is more dependent on the number of visitors on a particular month. During the Off Seasons, their monthly income is low from the Peak seasons.

Table 1: Yearly Visitor Status (2006-2016)

| Financial year | Ticket sold (native adult) | Ticket sold (native child) | Ticket sold (foreign visitors) | Total | Yearly Growth rate (%) |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| July 2006-June 2007 | 73504 | 7680 | - | 81184 | |
| July 2007-June 2008 | 81200 | 6345 | - | 87545 | 7.84 |
| July 2008-June 2009 | 74650 | 5690 | - | 80340 | -8.23 |
| July 2009-June 2010 | 64746 | - | 707 | 65453 | -18.53 |
| July 2010-June 2011 | 76168 | - | 591 | 76759 | 17.27 |
| July 2011-June 2012 | 93848 | - | 957 | 94805 | 23.51 |
| July 2012-June 2013 | 91433 | - | 1038 | 92471 | -2.46 |
| July 2013-June 2014 | 98391 | - | 1253 | 99644 | 7.76 |
| July 2014-June 2015 | 145400 | - | 1224 | 146624 | 47.15 |
| July 2015-June 2016 | 154880 | - | 1531 | 156411 | 6.67 |
| Total | 954220 | 19715 | 7301 | 981236 | |

Source: Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh

Table 2: Yearly Revenue of PWHS from 2008 to 2016

| Fiscal Year | Total Amount (Taka) |
|-------------|---------------------|
| 2008-2009 | 2,44,558.00 |
| 2009-2010 | 5,18,601.00 |
| 2010-2011 | 5,34,940.00 |
| 2011-2012 | 7,24,654.00 |
| 2012-2013 | 12,50,541.00 |
| 2013-2014 | 14,18,815.00 |
| 2014-2015 | 19,78,495.00 |
| 2015-2016 | 21,56,894.00 |

Source: Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh

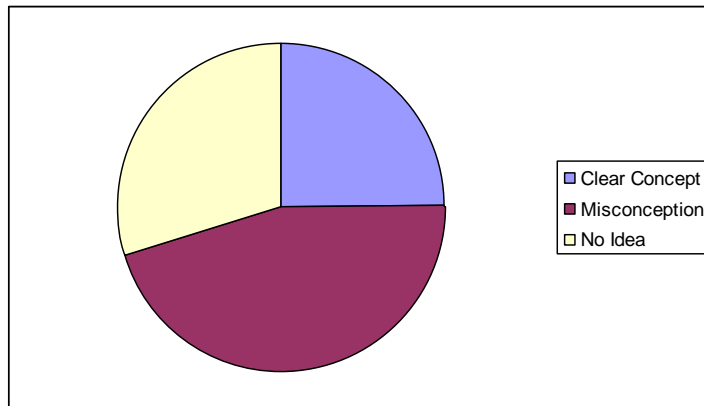


Figure 2: The concept rate of visitors about Pahapur (Oitihya Onweshan 2012)

- Every year a group of people visits Paharpur, but only 25% visitors have a clear concept on the Bihar. Alternatively, 45% visitors have misconception and 30% visitors have no idea on PWHS. As the maximum visitors have no idea about the importance of Paharpur, they do not care about the conservation of the environment of this tourism site.
- During the field survey, it was observed that polythene bags, chips packets, papers, cigarette packs, cigarette filter, nutshell, stone, and brick-bats are scattered everywhere which hampers the aesthetic beauty of the monument.

- Besides the main temple and Bihara there are many individuals' monuments. However, few monuments are properly labeled. As such, the visitors cannot understand the correlation among the monuments and their historical importance.
- Master diagrams which indicating all the monuments is also missing in the Paharpur. Moreover, there is no description of terracotta plaques which are the most significant artefacts in the monastery
- There are 63 stone sculptures in the basement of the main temple. At present, the 'in situ' sculptures are beneath the surface level. Though, lack of information about the underground sculptures around the temple is also noticed. Therefore, the visitors are deprived of seeing and knowing the sculptures.



Figure 3: Huge gathering at a time is harmful for the monument (Source: Authors)



Figure 4: Restriction notice is attached on the Cell Wall by using nail and that is harmful for the brick by itself (Source: Authors)



Figure 5: Visitors can climb in the top (Source: Authors)

- There is a no rest house for the general visitors. However, there is a rest house only for the Government officials, Ministers, Member of Parliament, Politicians and VIPs.
- The local people use the Paharpur complex as a grazing field for their goat and cow which also damage the environment of the site.
- The local residents stated that, natural hazard like water logging is a significant problem of the Biahara.
- It was also observed that local teenagers are used to passing their time by gossiping in the Paharpur compound. Moreover, they regularly play cricket and football match in the compound. On the other hand, the local people also tend to dry their clothes on the Bihara complex wall which hampers the natural magnificence of the site.
- The most striking thing is that Police, Ansar and Village Police in and around PWHS have not a clear concept about the heritage site. Additionally, they have not received any training on PWHS, nor they are concerned about the sustaining law regarding archaeological heritage entitling 'Antiquity Act 1968'. On the other hand, District/Upazila Administration officials or UP chairman also have no clear concepts and have no idea or training on the safeguard of Paharpur. It is also explored that none of the Department of Archaeology (DoA) officials received training regarding heritage management, conservation, and preservation of the Bihara.
- Over the years, several conservation works were carried out at the complex, but those were substandard that the site has undergone several unwanted changes and have lost its original features. Lack of monitoring is also a problem to conserve the site in a proper way.

Recommendations

The Buddhist Bihar of Paharpur was declared as World Cultural Heritage Site (WCHS) by UNESCO. As well as it was a renowned seat of Buddhist theological practices and research, especially Vajrayana ritual. Therefore, the monastery is not the property of Bangladesh alone rather of the whole international community. So, it is necessary to take effective steps to save this WCHS. From the revenue purpose, it is also a potential sector for Tourism. There is a tremendous

possibility to earn revenue from the local and foreign visitors. Before that, there should have some effective plans to maintain the standard facilities for the tourists. On the other hand, there is an opportunity to reduce the poverty of the local people by involving them to protect the Bihara. The specific recommendations to make the site more tourists friendly are as follows:

Firstly, the authority should take awareness program for the local people as we have seen that most of the peoples have not a very clear concept about the Biahara. This initiative can act as a catalyst to conserve the monument environment.

Secondly, visitor facilities i.e. proper seating arrangement, rest house, separate toilet arrangement for male and female, better transport facilities, etc. are highly required attracting tourists and earning more revenue from them.

Thirdly, there should have a strong local monitoring cell involving the local community and government officials to safeguard the Bihara from any natural as well as the human-induced hazard in a proper way.

Fourthly, a central monitoring cell needs to be established to monitor the overall mismanagement of Paharpur which mentioned in the earlier section in a proper way. The cell could consist of a genuine archaeologist, architect, conservation specialist and tourism consultant.

Conclusion

Tourism is one of the largest, most pervasive and fastest growing sectors of the world. In fact, heritage tourism appears to be growing much more quickly than all other forms of tourism, particularly in the developing countries and is thus viewed as an important potential tool for poverty alleviation and community economic development. From the earlier sections, it is clearly indicated that the Paharpur Buddhist Bihara has a plenty of tourism opportunity, though several mismanagement factors are hampers the prospects. In such context, an effective master plan is highly recommended for the safeguarding of the PWHS. It is worthwhile to mention that all project plans must be prepared by an expert team, not by any individual. Any master plan should be implemented under the supervision of a central monitoring cell. Moreover, in most cases, people visit heritage places to enhance learning, satisfy curiosity and feelings of nostalgia or 'discover themselves' (Cohen 2001: 180).

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