

## ISLAMIC TOURISM: EXPLORING A NEW FORM OF SACRED JOURNEY IN BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

*Islamic tourism is one of the newer forms of tourism in Bangladesh with a tendency to develop. Due to the geographical and economical importance of Muslim countries this tourism increases day by day. The aim of this tourism is to obtain the satisfaction of Allah and to attract visitors. The present study discusses the potentiality of Islamic tourism in Bangladesh. The study reveals the potential Islamic religious destination, festivals and events to develop Islamic tourism in Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh has huge potentials but fails to develop Islamic tourism, due to limited research activities, negative images, poor infrastructure, lack of proper policy and guidelines, advertising, and sound coordination among the Muslim countries. Secondary data were used to address the objectives in this study. Afterward the study endeavors to find the necessary actions needed to develop this tourism in Bangladesh. Some initiatives, such as developing tourism oriented infrastructure and communication, positive media role, proper marketing and coordination among Muslim countries are necessary for developing Islamic tourism. Bangladesh can develop Islamic tourism for knowing the glorious heritage of Islam to the present and future generations and also ensuring its economic sustainability.*

**Keywords:** *Islamic Tourism, Satisfaction, Destinations, Events, Bangladesh.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest earning sectors of Bangladesh. Tourism industry affects positively on the economy of Bangladesh for increasing foreign exchange earnings, and employment opportunities. According to World Travel and Tourism Council, the total contribution of Travel & Tourism to GDP in Bangladesh was BDT460.3bn (4.4% of GDP) in 2013, and is forecast to rise up to 7.9% in 2014, and to rise upto 6.5% pa to BDT935.5bn (4.7% of GDP) in 2024. Then in 2013, the total contribution of Travel & Tourism to employment, including jobs indirectly supported by the industry, was 3.8% of total employment (2,846,500 jobs). This is expected to rise by 4.2% in 2014 to 2,965,000 jobs and rise by 3.0% pa to 3,974,000 jobs in 2024 (4.2% of total) (WTTC, 2014).

Tourism is related to various aspects of Islam. Several researchers have given emphasize on how Islam supported in different tourism activities to enhance religious and social functions. Islam prompts the Muslims to travel for searching the beauty and creating adventure of Allah. Every year over a million of Muslim visit Saudi Arab in the time of Hajj. Again about 0.5 million people visit Bangladesh every year in the purpose of *Bishwa Ijtima*. The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) have emphasized on developing the tourism activities in the member countries. The OIC has arranged two Tourism Ministers' Meetings and a conference since 2000 which have discussed expanding tourism through improved research and training, marketing and upgraded infrastructure. In these meetings, speakers give much of the emphasis on tourism as a vehicle for reinforcing the solidarity of the Islamic community. They also discuss the ways of considering non-Muslim visitors who are more acceptable to the Muslim countries and there is recognition of the value of working with the World Tourism Organization and other international agencies.

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Greater travel by Muslims within the Islamic world could lead to better understanding, stimulate collaboration and serve for the common good. At the latest meeting, the speakers have advised creating more Islamic tour packages devoted to a Muslim heritage which has been largely ignored (Sayed, 2001).

Islamic tourism is a new tourism destination in the world today. The world's 57 Muslim countries have earned less than 10% of global tourism revenues. The four countries that dominate Muslim tourism—Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, and Malaysia—received 17.5 million tourists in 2004 (Hadhari, 2005). But it is one such overlooked area where Bangladesh has immense potential. The aim of this study is to explore the resources and the potentialities to develop Islamic tourism in Bangladesh in order to attract the tourists all over the world and to get the satisfaction of Allah as well..

## 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:

- To explore the potentials of Islamic tourism development in Bangladesh.
- To identify the constraints to the development of Islamic Tourism in Bangladesh.
- To provide recommendations for the development of Islamic tourism.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Secondary data were used to address the objectives in this study. The necessary data from secondary sources were collected through document analysis. For this purpose a thorough literature survey has been conducted. In order to obtain the reliable secondary data various journals, periodicals, books, acts, regulations, policies of Bangladesh, websites, annual reports, papers of different agencies were consulted carefully.

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, Tourism is closely linked to religion which has acted as a powerful motif for traveling. Religious buildings, rituals, festivals and religious events are important tourist attractions for those who are the followers of the particular systems of belief represented (Henderson, 2003). The evolution of tourism in Europe and the Middle East, revealing different patterns is partly linked to religious doctrine (Ritter, 1975). Now, research has been conducted for identifying relationship in various aspects of religion and tourism. The commercially potential of the religious travel market has also been highlighted in the Muslim countries (Bywater, 1994; Russell, 1999).

Islamic tourism has a positive impact on the tourists and travelers as well as on Muslim societies. In Islamic tourism, visitors have travelled in a place for the satisfaction of Allah and their recreation. Tourism is a part of life and not contradictory to the fundamental theme of Islam. So, tourism in Islam is a purposeful activity that aims to achieve physical, social and spiritual satisfaction along with Allah's blessings ( Bhuiyan et al., 2011).

Abdel-Sahib Al-Shakry, explains the meaning of "Islamic" in the context of tourism in three main blocks: first, the revival of Islamic cultures and the spread of Islamic values; second, the economic benefit for Islamic societies; and, third, the strengthening of Islamic self confidence, identity, and beliefs in the face of negative stereotyping in comparison to other cultures and lifestyles (Sahib, 2001). Islamic Tourism could be reflected in three major concepts: economic, cultural, and religious/ conservative concepts. The economic concept for Islamic tourism focuses on the importance of intra-Muslim tourism for new markets and tourism destinations. The cultural vision for Islamic tourism includes Islamic religious/ cultural and pedagogical and self confidence-building elements. The religious/ conservative concept for Islamic tourism has not yet been theoretically articulated, but various opinions and remarks in discussions on the future of tourism in the Arab and Islam worlds indicate that this articulation is just a matter of time. The whole idea

is based on the conservative interpretation and understanding of Islam (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004).

## 5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 5.1. Potentials of Islamic tourism in Bangladesh

Bangladesh, with its rich history and heritage has always been a hub for different religious activities and preachers and saints from nearly all the major religions which had made their base in this country at some point of time or other. Be it in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity - major establishments and other remnants from the past still remain on the soils of this land beckoning those who are interested to come and discover.

The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), a subsidiary of OIC, has declared Dhaka as the capital of Islamic culture in 2012. Bangladesh celebrated the 400 years of Dhaka city. The fame of Dhaka as a city of mosque is not unfounded.

### 5.2. Developing Islamic Tourism in Bangladesh through Destination

According to the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Bangladesh hosts more than 250,000 mosques. Bangladesh hosts some of the most beautiful mosques like Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Star Mosque, Shat Gombuj Mosque, Binat Bibi Mosque, Bara Sharifpur Mosque, Shailkupa Mosque, Jhaudiya Mosque, Kherua Mosque, Bojra Shahi Mosque, Shona Mosque, Khaja Mosque, Musa Kha Mosque, Tin Gombudge Mosque, Baitul Falah Mosque, Bibi Mariam Mosque, Chandanpura Mosque, Laldighi Mosque, Shah Shuja Mosque, Sura Mosque, Mahasthan Mosque etc. which attract tourists for long years. There are many prominent shrines and tombs in Bangladesh having great spiritual values attracting thousands of devotees. Bangladesh is also famous for Solakia Eid Gha Maidan which is one of the biggest Eid congregations accommodating 250 rows or about 150,000 of participants in every congregation. Prominent Islamic religious sites are:

#### 5.2.1. Baitul Mukarram Mosque

National mosque of Bangladesh is Baitul Mukarram. It is situated in the capital of Bangladesh. Baitul Mukarram is the 10th biggest mosque in the world which has the capacity of more than 30,000 people at a time. It has magnificent interior with both the modern architectural features and traditional principles of Mughal architecture along with the beautiful lawn and garden.

#### 5.2.2. Star Mosque

Star Mosque is located at Armanitola in Old Dhaka. The mosque, both inside and outside, is decorated with mosaic. The outer wall between the doors is decorated with the motif of Mount Fuji on glazed tiles and a crescent-and-star design decorates the upper part of the facade. Hundreds of blue stars have been created on the domes of white marble. All over the mosque the motif of stars dominate the decoration and so the mosque is called the Star Mosque.

#### 5.2.3. Musa Khan Mosque

Musa Khan Mosque is one of the oldest mosques in Bangladesh. It was established by the Musa Khan, son and successor of Isa Khan. This mosque is located in old Dhaka.

#### 5.2.4. Binat Bibi Mosque

Binat Bibi Mosque, the 600-year old mosque, is the earliest surviving mosque in Dhaka, built in 1454 by Bakht Binat, the daughter of Marhamat. The mosque is a square, single domed one measuring 12 feet (3.7 m) square internally with a single hemispherical dome at the top of the square room. Pre-Mughal features included the curved cornices and battlements, corner octagonal turrets, and arches on the south, north, and eastern sides.

#### 5.2.5. Bibi Mariam's Mosque

Bibi Mariam's Mosque was built under the period of Mughal intervention in around 1860. It is situated at Hajiganj locality in Narayanganj. This is one of the beautiful and magnificent Mughal Architectures in Bangladesh.

#### 5.2.6. Shat Gombuj Mosque, Bagerhat

The largest multi domed mosques in Bangladesh is Shat Gombuj Mosque situated in Bagerhat. It was established by Khan Jahan Ali, a Muslim Sufi Saint and local ruler in Bagerhat. The mosque is roofed over with 77 squat domes including 7 chauchala or four-sided pitched Bengali domes in the middle row.

#### 5.2.7. Shailkupa Mosque

Shailkupa Mosque a six domed mosque of the independent Sultanate period of Bengal. It is situated at Shailkupa upazila sadar under Jhenaidaha district. It is one of the most beautiful architectural edifices of the Medieval Bengal. The mosque was built in 1520 AD during the reign of Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah, son of Sultan Alauddin Husain Shah.

#### 5.2.8. Kherua Mosque

This is an old mosque situated in the village, Khandakartola, under Sherpur Upazila in the district of Bogra. The mosque had been built more than 400 years ago, in the year of 1582 A.D. by some Mirza Murad Khan Qaqshal, son of Jauhar Ali Khan. According to the Mughal architecture, their mosque consists of only a prayer hall, which is now single-aisled with three or five bays.

#### 5.2.9. The Shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal

The Shrine of Saint Hazrat Shah Jalal is the most historically attracted place in Sylhet town. Today, more than six hundred years after his death, the shrine is being visited by innumerable devotees of every caste and creed, who make the journey from far away places. Legend says, the great saint who came from Delhi to preach Islam and defeated the then Hindu Raja (king) Gour Gobinda, transformed the witchcraft followers of the Raja into catfishes which are still alive in the tank adjacent to the shrine. Swords, the holy Quran and the robes of the holy saint are still preserved in the shrine.

#### 5.2.10. The Shrine of Hazrat Shah Paran

Shah Paran was a renowned Sufi saint of the Suhrawardiyya and Jalalia order. It is said that he was the son of a sister of Hazrat Shah Jalal (R) and was born in Hadramaut, Yemen. In 1303 AD, He took part in the expedition of Sylhet which was led by Shah Jalal.

#### 5.2.11. Shrine of Hazrat Bayezad Bostami

The famous Chilla of Hazrat Sultan Bayezid Bostami is situated on a low hillock at Nasirabad, to the extreme north of the Chittagong city. He was born in 777 A.D. at Bostan in Iran. A mosque built during the reign of Emperor Aurangazeb stands on the bank of a big tank at the foot of the hillock on which the shrine is situated. There are several hundred tortoises in the tank. It has been a traditional belief that these animals are evil spirits (Djinnns) who were cast into this shape because they incurred the wrath of the great saint who visited the place about 1,100 years ago.

#### 5.2.12. The Dargah of Hazrat Shah Amanat

The dargah Sharif of Hazrat Shah Sufi Amanat Shah lies to the central jail and east of the Laldighi. He flourished during the later part of the 18th and early part of 19th century.

#### 5.2.13. Shah Turkan's Dargah

Shah Turkan's Dargah, a domical south facing small brick structure, has been believed to enshrine the mortal remains of a legendary Sufi saint named Shah Turkan Shahid. It is located on the western bank of the Karatoya at Sherpur/ Murcha in the district of Bogra about 16 miles due south of the Bogra town and about a mile east of the more famous 3-domed Kherua mosque (1582 AD).

#### 5.2.14. Developing Islamic Tourism in Bangladesh through Events and Festivals

In Bangladesh, religious festivals and events are so deeply rooted in the social organism that they continue to entertain from generation to generation. Among religious events and festivals of Muslims in Bangladesh Bishwa Ijtema (second largest Muslim congregation in the world), Ashura (marks the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali), Eid ul Fitr (end of Ramadan), Eid ul Azha (Festival of Sacrifice), Milad Un-Nabi (birthday of the prophet of Islam, Muhammad (Sm)), Isra and Mi'raj (spiritual journey of the prophet of Islam Muhammad (Sm)), Shab-e-Barat (night of forgiveness), Ramadan (month of fasting), Shab-e-Qadr (night of value), Juma'tul Wida (last Friday of Ramadan) are the most prominent. Bangladesh observes and celebrates these Islamic events and festivals with religious fervor, sanctity and highest dignity by which country can take comparative advantages over SAARC countries in boosting domestic as well as international Islamic travel and contributes significantly to the economy. Bishwa Ijtema, second largest Muslim congregation in the world plays a vital role in attracting million tourists to visit beautiful Bangladesh.

#### 5.2.15. Bishwa Ijtema

The Bishwa Ijtema is an annual Tablighi Jamaat Islamic movement congregation held at Tongi, by the river Turag. It is the second largest Muslim congregation in the world after the holy Hajj. Prayer is held for the spiritual adulation, exaltation and welfare of the Muslims community. The first meeting was reportedly held in 1946 and continues to be organized by the Bangladesh Tablighi Jamaat. The local police estimated the number of attendees of 2007 ijtema to be 3 million while in 2010 the number of attendees was 5 million. Since 2012 Bishwa Ijtema has been holding in two phases in order to accommodate such a large number of devotees. In 2014 more than 50,000 foreign devotees from approximately 150 countries, attended the Ijtema seeking divine blessings from Allah.

### 5.3. Constraints to the Development of Islamic Tourism in Bangladesh

In spite of huge potentials, Bangladesh has not yet been able to develop a very strong Islamic tourists attracted regions for some limitations. These are

#### 5.3.1. Negative Images

Bangladesh has now been treated as a dangerous place for terrorist's activities. In the recent history, some severe attack by the terrorists even in the tourist spots of Bangladesh creates a negative image throughout the world. In 2004 two people were killed and 70 people were injured in a powerful bomb blast, at the Shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal in Sylhet which created negative images of Bangladesh to the world.

#### 5.3.2. Poor Infrastructure

Infrastructure is a vital element to develop tourism in any country. Bangladesh cannot attract tourists for poor infrastructure and transportation system. Biswa Iztema is held in winter season and many devotees suffer from cold wave because there is unavailability of accommodation. In 2014 a total of 26 participants died during Biswa Iztema.

#### 5.3.3. Inadequate Research Activities

Tourism is a researchable matter. There are huge research, conducting all over the world on this topic. Researchers are engaged to investigate and to find out how tourism may be a tool for

sustainable development, livelihood security and economic development. But Bangladesh does not have proper and adequate initiatives to research on Islamic tourism.

#### 5.3.4. Proper Policy and Guidelines

Bangladesh could not develop common policy and strategy for Islamic tourism. Even they are not yet able to build up proper international relationship in this point.

#### 5.3.5. Monetizing Religion

In the race of developing as many niches as possible, there is often the issue of religion being 'monitized', as the host community getting increasingly driven by the 'profit motive'. Sometimes, religious spots misuse orthodox religious belief and faith, demanding money and exploiting the general people.

#### 5.3.6. Marketing Problem

Some tourism dominated countries adopt modern and suitable marketing strategies for developing their tourism industry. They also focus their tourism places to the tourists with market oriented ways. Due to the lack of proper marketing strategy, Islamic tourism of Bangladesh could not focus highly among the worldwide tourists.

#### 5.3.7. Lack of Co-ordination

Tourism oriented countries have developed various agreements and co-operations among them in this sector for increasing business opportunities. Lack of these types of co-operations among Muslim countries and agencies have deprived Bangladesh from the benefits of Islamic tourism sector.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1. Recommendations to Develop Islamic Tourism in Bangladesh

Bangladesh can ensure an Islamic tourism market in the country by playing a very strong and positive role. By utilizing the tourism potentiality all over the country, Bangladesh can take initiative to foster this sector for their economic benefit. The following steps may be taken in this regard.

### 6.2. Developing Infrastructure and Communication

In Bangladesh, tourism places must be ensured with proper infrastructure and communication facilities to attract the tourists. Islamic resorts and hotels, as well as Islamic destinations will shape the tourism activities; alcohol-free accommodations in which gender-segregation and the dress code will be strictly respected and controlled; available prayer-rooms on site; and "Islamic" transportation facilities (Al-Hamarneh & Steiner, 2004).

### 6.3. Ensuring the Security of the Tourists

Security at the destined places is considered as one of the major factors for the foreign tourists. Every foreign tourist gives the high priority on security while selecting a foreign country as a tour destination. Therefore, the question of adequate security to the tourists during their visit is also very important (Nurunnabi, 1995). Any sort of risk and uncertainty related to the destination will lead the tourists not to select that particular destination. The government of Bangladesh should improve the security in the major tourist areas with a view to correcting Bangladesh's tarnished image.

### 6.4. Arranged Islamic Tourism Events

Bangladesh should arrange gender segregated sport and wellness facilities and "Islamic" entertainment programs in tourism places. Elements of this concept are already implemented with a greater success by Saudi Arabia and Iran in their tourism industry.

#### **6. 5. Use of Information Technology in Promotional Activity**

The recent change and progress in information technology have a revolutionary impact on tourism industry. Because of travel, tourism-related products and services are highly compatible with the Internet and the rapid growth of the Internet is having an impact on the distribution of travel services which has heightened speculation about the potential for disintermediation of the travel agent (Bennett & Lai, 2005). Again, the international tourism system is dependent on information technology for its future growth, competitiveness and long-term survival - particularly in terms of tourism marketing and distribution (Morgan et al, 2001). Bangladesh tourism authority must consider the effective use of this technology for the promotional activity of this industry. They must try to build up a positive image as a Muslim country to focus the Islamic tourism.

#### **6. 6. Positive Media Role**

Bangladesh tourism should emphasize first on its promotional measures to correct this negative image. But it is an issue that cannot be solved only by Bangladesh tourism authority, it requires the government's initiative as a whole and the Bangladesh Mission offices abroad have also a major role to play in this regard. As Bangladesh tourism industry does not have enough funds to use to international media for correcting this negative image, it should emphasize on the printed materials and to distribute it to the potential tourists through different airlines, foreign tour operators and foreign mission abroad etc. Media can play a vital role to foster Islamic tourism activities. Bangladesh can establish satellite channel, newspaper and other media house for promoting Islamic tourism.

#### **6. 7. Use of Foreign Tour Operators to Promote Bangladesh as a tourist Destination**

Foreign tour operators can play an important role to motivate the potential tourists to a specific tourist destination. Bangladesh *Parjatan* Corporation (BPC) and the private tour operators of Bangladesh can maintain the contact and liaison with the foreign tour operators and to influence them to send more tourists to Bangladesh. Even foreign tour operators can be used to distribute the brochure, souvenirs, and tourists' maps of Bangladeshi tourism Industry. For this purpose they need to have some incentives. Bangladesh can sell package tours through foreign tour operators where they receive a handsome amount of discount.

#### **6. 8. More Discounted Offer for a Group Tour and Long Stay**

Bangladesh can attract more tourists by offering more discounts on group tours and long stay visits during prominent Islamic events and festivals. For example, discount on air tickets, hotel rents, discounted price of local transport arranged by the tour operators etc. In addition to that, the tourism authority should offer more off-season discounts, students' discounts, SAARC tour rebate etc. in order to motivate the potential tourists to visit the Islamic tourism spots in Bangladesh.

#### **6. 9. Encouraging More Private Sector Investment**

Bangladesh tourism industry needs a huge investment in order to develop infrastructural facilities and promotional measures. To encourage the private investment, the government should declare some incentives to the private investors. The incentives like tax holiday for a certain period on their return, tax free import of vehicles for using in tourism, arrangement of loans at a lower rate of interest, providing physical facilities etc. can be considered favourably for this purpose. A revised tax holiday package for the hotel industry will provide incentives for the construction of new units and motivate the tourists to stay longer period (Hossain and Firozzaman, 2003).

#### **6. 10. Coordination among the Different Related Sectors**

As tourism is a multifaceted industry, there should have coordination among the tour operators, hoteliers, airlines, local transport authorities and other service provider so that their coordinated

efforts can be fruitful. Again, there should have the necessary coordination among the concerned ministries like ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Home, Foreign Affairs, Transport and Health so that the visit of the tourists can be made safer, healthier and enjoyable.

#### **6. 11. Co-ordination between Muslim Countries**

Bangladesh can arrange joint tourism packages with other Muslim countries to attract huge tourists. By this package programs they can ensure broader economic activities for the country.

#### **6. 12. Role of OIC**

OIC is the highest platform for the Muslim world. Bangladesh can create and maintain an international linkage with OIC to increase their tourism activities.

#### **6. 13. Increases Tourism Research**

Bangladesh should sanction necessary funds for continuous research activities in Islamic tourism. They can establish research institutes and sponsor the tourism scholars in this regard.

### **7. CONCLUSION**

Islamic tourism is a way to perform the religious duty. By this tourism Muslims have to invite the whole world towards the path of Islam. If all these development, promotional, managerial strategies along with policy issues are implemented in a coordinated manner by the Government and different role-playing-agencies, tourism sector in Bangladesh will definitely yield a positive result in terms of exploration of future potentials, maximization of foreign currency earning, employment generation, and social and cultural development. If done so, it is expected that the industry would be able to fulfill its objectives, develop to a considerable extent; and the present and future generations will know the glorious heritage of Islam and it will also ensure the economic sustainability of the local people.

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