

Forest-based Tourism in Bangladesh: Challenges Unveiled for the Sundarbans

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the ever-growing industries all around the world. It has been highlighted recently as a priority sector for Bangladesh to utilize the country's natural beauty, cultural, and archaeological heritage. Among lots of attractions, the Sundarbans Reserved Forest (SRF) in Bangladesh is the single most extensive mangrove forest in the world. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared the Sundarbans as a world heritage site since it represents the world's largest continuous mangrove forest. Despite having so many advantageous factors and parameters, Sundarbans has not been able to attract the deserved level of attention and remains impoverished. This study has considered the Sundarbans as a single holistic case to understand various challenges within a lens of forest-based tourism aligning the tourism development context of Bangladesh. In so doing, a qualitative research approach has been employed. Under such an approach, multiple data collection techniques have been utilized to collect empirical evidence including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and secondary (both published and unpublished) sources. Findings of the study indicate that tourism development in Sundarbans is challenged by inadequate infrastructures, lack of proper planning and management, dominance of wealthy urban elites, lack of training and education, limited support from local authorities, issues of security, and deception from fraudulent intermediaries. This research is particularly meaningful for tourism policymakers in Bangladesh who lack research support for their decisions.

Keywords: forest-based tourism, challenges, the Sundarbans, tourism policymakers, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is endowed with stunning natural beauty. All the divisions of Bangladesh offer a variety of natural and cultural destinations suitable for the tourist attractions. This small country hosts a number of natural tourists' destinations including the world's longest sea beach Cox's Bazar and the world's largest mangrove forest Sundarban (Khondker and Ahsan, 2015). Proper nurturing and management of natural destinations can attract tourists from across the world. Alongside, tourism can be a significant contributor to our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Das and Chakraborty, 2012). Despite the fact that the country hosts diverse tourism resources, it fails to produce any remarkable benefits from tourism yet. Recently Bangladesh Government has declared the tourism industry as one its priority sectors and the National Tourism Policy 2010 highlights the proper development of both the nature-based and culture-based tourism in different destinations considering the industry's potential to generate benefits at local levels.

The Sundarbans Reserve Forests (SRF), a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) world heritage site, is a well-known mangrove forest and a unique tourism destination considering its rich bio-diversity, scenic beauty, and the presence of friendly host communities and livelihood groups (Haque et al., 2016; Islam, Iftekhar, and Islam, 2011; Islam, Rahman, Iftekhar, and Rakkibu, 2013). A destination's tourism potential has been well acknowledged by the academic scholars and practitioners (Bhuiyan, Siwar, Ismail, and Islam, 2011a; Bhuiyan, Siwar, Ismail, and Islam, 2011b; Islam et al., 2013; Haque et al., 2016; Lee, Huang, and Yeh, 2011; Salam, Lindsay, and Beveridge, 2000). However, despite its immense potential, tourism has not been well flourished yet in this destination. It has been reported that the numbers of international tourist are decreasing along with a sharp decrease of tourism revenue in that context (Chakraborty and Eagle, 2017).

Hence, a proper understanding is required to unveil the issues that impede the tourism development in the Sundarbans. The extant tourism related studies in this context in most of the cases highlighted the potential of the destination to develop different forms of tourism such as community-based tourism and ecotourism. However, very little has been documented addressing the barriers of tourism development in this context. Considering this phenomenon, the current study aims to develop an in-depth understating of the barriers relevant to the tourism development in the Sundarbans, Bangladesh. This study follows a qualitative case study approach.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Forest and Tourism

With the growing interest in ecotourism and outdoor recreation, forests have become an increasingly essential element for the tourism industry (Kuvan, 2005). Accordingly, an increasing growth has been observed in the forest centric tourism development in different parts of the world (Bhuiyan et al., 2011a). Kuvan (2005) identified two reasons for such important role of forest in tourism: forests comprise the tourism's natural capital and supply raw materials, and forest itself is a key touristic and recreational product complementing the other sectors in this industry (e.g., accommodation, transport, and infrastructure). Adding to this discussion, Simpson (2008) interchangeably used the terms nature tourism and forest tourism and identified several key features such as the direct engagement with the comparatively uninterrupted phenomenon (Valentine, 1992); fostering an understanding and care for natural environment (Newsome, Moore, and Dowling, 2002); and minimizing adverse impacts on natural and socio-cultural environment. Considering such tourism as resource-based tourism, Stokowski (2000) described it as the experience arising from natural areas and amenities serving as an active site of attractions and recreation. Tourism development in protected area forests, National parks, and reserved forests in various context is evident in the literature. Apart from the tourists' interest, developing countries have a particular interest in such forest-based tourism development including managing the necessary fund for the conservation and maintenance of these forests' areas (Krug, 2000). Hence, considering the potential for tourism to provide local employment and funding for conservation, many developing countries such as Kenya and Nepal successfully introduced tourism in protected and forest areas (Nepal, 2000; Tosun 1998).

2.2 Elements for Forest-based Tourism

Different authors (Kim, Lee and Klenosky, 2003, Deng, King, and Bauer, 2002; Jeong, 1997; Lee et al., 2011) have identified different factors associated with the forest-based tourism development. For example, Jeong (1997) underscored six essential elements for forest-based tourism development in mountainous regions including natural resources, historical cultural resources, walking trails, recreational facilities, information and convenient infrastructure, and proper lodging and commercial facilities. Similarly, Deng et al. (2002) identified five critical contributors for the overall attractiveness of a national park entailing tourism resources, tourist facilities, accessibility, local communities, and peripheral attractions. In order to develop a successful forest-based tourism destination, Kim et al. (2003) emphasized three key elements: tourist resources, information and convenience of facilities, and accessibility and transportation. Besides natural attractions, three key issues have been found similar in different studies covering information, infrastructure, and access to the relevant tourist facilities, which are critical for the proper development of forest-centered tourism destinations.

2.3 Factors Affecting the Tourism Development in a Destination

Building a positive image is crucial for any destination to be popular among the visitors. Numerous authors have highlighted the importance of destination image from different perspectives (Chi and Qu, 2008; Chew and Jahari, 2014). For example, Henderson (2011) stated that international visitors perceive a negative impression towards a destination with an improper arrangement of infrastructures of a country. Development of proper tourism infrastructure is thus essential for any destination. Seetanaah et al., (2016) in their study in Mauritius found the positive contribution of tourism infrastructure in determining the destination's popularity. Based on the previous literature Jovanic' and Ilic' (2016) illustrated that 'tourism infrastructure' covers a broad categories including physical structures (e.g., hotels, motels, water, transportation and communication, etc.), cultural structures (e.g., cultures, heritages, local arts, music and dance, fairs, festivals, etc.), service infrastructures (e.g., banking and insurance facilities, travel agencies, tour guides, etc.), and governance infrastructures (e.g., law and order, customs and immigration, etc.). Henderson (2011) also mentioned that political instability, security and safety as an influential factor for both domestic and foreign tourists. Such a focus on destination safety was also given by Kozak, Crotts and Law (2007). Their study found that perceived risks affect the travel decision of the tourists, and especially the international travelers are more sensitive to such risk and safety issues. They also argued that such perception of risk varies from culture to culture. However, it is quite evident that the issues of safety and security of a destination are critical for any tourism destination.

2.4 Forest, Tourism, and Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a country with immense tourism potential as this small country host a number of tourist attractions including both the natural and cultural elements (Das and Chakraborty 2012; Hassan, Ullah and Chowdhury, 2013; Tuhin and Majumdar, 2011). The country hosts a variety of forests in different parts ranging from tropical forest to swamp forest, and mangrove forest (Alam, Furukawa and Akter, 2010). Many of these forest areas have been declared as protected areas and wildlife sanctuaries. Concurrently, forest-based tourism which is also commonly known as ecotourism in this context has been developed in different protected area forests in Bangladesh such as in different national parks and wildlife sanctuaries including the Sundarbans (Chowdhury

and Koike, 2010). However, the tourism industry in general has not been flourished yet (Alam et al., 2010; Howladar, 2015), which is evidenced through its insignificant contribution to the country's GDP (Chakraborty and Eagle, 2017). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC: 2017), the direct contribution of tourism in the country's GDP was only 2.2% in 2016 representing poor performance of this sector in comparison to the other neighboring countries. Adding to this, Khondoker and Ahsan (2015) identified the growing trend of domestic visitors travelling abroad and decreasing trend in the arrival of foreign tourists. On this note, they argued that such trend indicates the failure of the domestic tourism attractions to attract tourists, which in turn corresponds the views of Chakraborty and Eagle (2017) in the context of Sundarbans where they highlighted the declining numbers of tourists and amount of revenue. Henceforth, the necessity to unveil the challenges associated with tourism development in the Sundarbans remains a concern both for the academia and practitioners.

3. Contextual Setting of the Study

The Sundarbans is the world's largest Mangrove forest located in the south-western region of the country under the Khulna division between 21°30' and 22°30' N and 89°00' and 89°55' E (Iftekhar and Islam, 2004). This forest lies on the delta of Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers on the Bay of Bengal. This world-famous mangrove forest shares the border between Bangladesh and India where around 60% of the forest area falls in Bangladesh and the rest 40% lies in the West Bengal of India. The Sundarbans Reserve Forests (SRF) in Bangladesh comprises an area of 1,40,000 ha approximately which was inscribed as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1997. The area consists of three sanctuaries: Sundarbans west, south, and east. This mangrove forest offers a unique biodiversity in its terrestrial, marine, and aquatic habitats including 350 species of vascular plants, 250 fishes, and 300 birds (Gopal and Chauhan, 2006). This forest is the natural habitat of world's famous Royal Bengal Tiger, spotted deer, and other endangered species such as estuarine crocodile and the Indian python (Salam et al., 2000, Haque et al., 2016). Considering its rich biodiversity and inscription as a world heritage site, this destination has become very popular to both domestic and foreign tourists. The six distinct areas in the Sundarbans that offer the most potential for tourism activities are Katka, Dubla island, Hiron point, Mandarbaria, Koromjal, and Kochikhaly. Different tour operators offer package tours to Sundarbans especially during the winter season. Major tourists' attractions include boating through hundreds of meandering streams, creeks, and rivers; wildlife photography; meeting and participating with local fishermen, woodcutters and honey collectors (Alam et al., 2009).

4. Methodology

Within a single holistic case (Yin, 2014), this research focused on the investigation into the barriers of tourism development in the Sundarbans. This study has employed a case study approach due to its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of the contemporary phenomenon, opportunity to use a variety of data sources, and presenting the information through a variety of lens (Yin, 2014, Jennings, 2010). This study has utilized qualitative interview technique along with participants' observation as the primary methods of data collection. The authors have admitted the effectiveness of qualitative interview technique over the conventional survey in gaining an in-depth understanding of the research issue due to its flexible nature (Yin, 2014; Rubin and Rubin, 2011). Accordingly, a semi-structured interview has been used to inform the research objectives in this research. Alongside, direct observation of the researchers also complemented the data gathered through the semi-structured interviews. Acknowledging the strength of the observation, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) considered observation as an essential tool for gathering information in a real-life setting. In total, fifteen participants were interviewed to obtain the relevant information. The participants' category represents the key stakeholders within the research setting and includes tourists, tour operators, local people, and institutional representatives such as forest department officials. The coverage of research participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiling research participants

Category	Interview code	Quantity
Institutional Representatives	interview no. 1, 11, 13, 14	04
Tourists	interview no. 2, 6, 9, 12	04
Tour Operators	interview no. 4, 8	02
Local People (community)	interview no. 3, 5, 7, 10, 15	05
Total		15

Convenience sampling was used to select the tourist participants and the local people, and judgmental sampling was used to select the tour operators and institutional representatives. The researchers decided to stop interviewing when they observed data saturation.

This study has adopted the six-stage thematic analysis process for the qualitative data suggested by Braun and Clark (2006). These stages are: getting familiar with the data (transcribing and repeatedly reading the data), generating initial codes, collating codes in to potential themes, reviewing the themes, refining the themes, and

producing the final report. Interviews were transcribed first and then translated to the English. In translating the data, the authors ensured accuracy by cross-checking the translated files three times altogether. Thereafter, the researchers read the interview transcripts a few times to get a thorough understanding of the whole data set. Later on, the interview transcripts were coded manually and categorized under the potential themes, which were refined and defined correspondingly to finalize for final reporting.

5. Key Findings of the Study

The findings from the interviews provided insights into a number of challenges for the development of tourism in the Sundarbans, which have been summarized in Table 2 as follows.

Table 2. Key themes and issues summarizing the study findings

Base theme	Sub-themes	Emergent issues
Tourism development challenges/barriers in the Sundarbans	Infrastructure	- Transport problem - Accommodation problem - Poor restroom facilities - Poor refreshment facilities
	Planning and management	- Lack of planning - Poor management - No idea about carrying capacity - Budget constraint - No authority to control transport fare - Lack of promotional activities - Lack of coordination
	Wealthy urban elites	- Urban accommodation facilities - Urban tour operators - High charge of facilities - Local people are deprived
	Awareness of local people	- Illiteracy - Lack of tourism knowledge
	Training and education	- Lack of eco- tourism practice - Tour guides insufficiency - Improper behavior by transport personnel - No guideline for tourists
	Support from local authorities	- Lack of attention by forest department - Lengthy coast guard formalities - Lack of motivational activities
	Security	- Political instability - Pirates and extortion practices - Lack of security guards
	Fraudulent intermediary	- Unethical tour operators - No specific guideline to monitor activities

Main barriers identified by the research participants are listed under the sub-themes in Table 2 with accompanying issues that eventually raised a concern for tourism development in the Sundarbans. These issues have been reported briefly following data evidence.

5.1 Inadequate Infrastructure

Inadequate transport and accommodation facilities in the Sundarbans are found as a major obstacle for tourism development. Most of the interviewees highlighted the inconvenience of reaching the Sundarbans. On this note, one tourist (interview no. 2) commented that:

There is no available bus (indicating direct bus) to Sundarban. We came here with a personal arrangement. We also required to take a number of breaks due to the absence of direct transport to Sundarban. It kills (our) time and reduces the interest to visit. The transports especially land transports, which are used for tourists surrounding this area are nothing special than those used for the locals. Moreover, those are not in good condition.

Participants argued for a direct and convenient transport services to the Sundarbans raising the issues of poor standards along with high perceived travel risk among the tourists. The researchers' field work also challenged by the difficulties in managing transports to reach especially the community participants. Adding to this transport problem, the research participants also highlighted the lack of accommodation facilities for tourists. Twelve out of the fifteen participants (80%) argued that poor accommodation facilities contributing negatively to

attract tourists and make their stay profitable. The observation of a tour operator (interview no. 4) is noteworthy who claimed that most of tourists target this destination as a single day visit rather than a prolonged stay, which in turn is influenced by the lack of quality accommodation. The participant later highlighted the opportunity for home stay at local peoples' home to render tourism benefits directly to the local communities. Development of such a homestay facility could be a way to avoid the building of the large hotel infrastructure considering the bio-diversity of the area.

Research participants frequently mentioned the issues of basic tourist facilities such as restroom and refreshment facilities. Most of the participants (tourists) expressed their frustration over the unavailability of a minimum standard toilet or restroom for the tourists. Participants also argued that there is no arrangement of the refreshments for the tourist. Such a claim is equally acknowledged by institutional representatives. For instance, one institutional research participant (interview no. 13) commented that:

Though the condition of Sundarban is improving, still there are some basic infrastructure-based problems. In Kotka there is a waiting room, but no toilet facility. In Karamjal there are no restrooms and toilet facilities. There is no arrangement for light refreshment too. As tourists come from distant places, the arrangement of these facilities is very essential. In absence of these facilities, tourists sometimes are forced to spoil the forest environment for their natural needs.

The observation from the above statement clearly pinpoints the importance of the development of basic tourists' facilities. A similar view was also expressed by most of the tourists and tour operators. Development of the minimum tourist facilities will help to satisfy tourists as well as contribute to the conservation of the forest.

Apart from the basic tourist facilities, the need for other relevant infrastructures was also emphasized such as the development of terminals and landing station. For example, one community participant (interview no. 7) mentioned that the government's attention and concern is much required to develop different structures in a planned way to give ease to tourists. The participant thereafter noted that "there are no arrangements for tourists to get down safely from the ship to different tourist sites. It creates a problem for the tourists especially for women." However, one government official in this research observed the necessity of developing the required infrastructures is not only critical to attract tourists but also to enhance the capacity of relevant authorities to manage the destination better.

5.2 Lack of Planning and Management

According to the research participants, the absence of proper planning and poor management of destination are two key barriers for the tourism development in the Sundarbans. Nearly 70% (10 out of 15) of the research participants have acknowledged that whimsical tourism development coupled with lack of institutional coordination and supervision are creating problems for Sundarbans' tourism. For example, one institutional participant (interview no. 14) asserted:

... In my views, a clear absence of planning and implementation mechanism is the prime concern for the Sundarbans' tourism. Tourists have to face transportation problems on a large scale. There is no direct transport to this destination except a few local buses from Khulna to Mongla. Tourists need to use those or hire personal vehicles, which are very costly but poorly managed. Tourists' need to hire boats whose fare are also very high. There is no authority to monitor these issues.

The lack of coordination and absence of specific authority to check the tourism-related issues eventually affect touristic experiences badly. Market fails a large extent but lack of government interventions is turning the situation worst such as there remains an uncontrolled dominance from the existing transport service providers who charge very high prices unethically. Most of the tourist participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the fare of the boats. This was an in-field experience of the researchers as well. The researchers observed many tourists tired of bargaining with the boat service providers for a reasonable fare. In addition, the maintenance of the tourism spots in Sundarbans is very poor. Although there are various attractive spots exist there, lack of proper maintenance resulting meagre number of tourists. For example, a tourist (interview no. 2) shared his/her experiences as follows:

Sundarban is waning its glory day by day due to the lack of planning and effective arrangement of resources. Poor supervision and maintenance adding toll to this. I have visited this park of Karamjal three times, and every time I have realized that the condition of the park is deteriorating. Recently, the concerned authorities have taken steps to work on it, but the steps are not sufficient.

Extending this argument, another participant (institutional representative, interview no. 11) underscored the necessity to determine the carrying capacity emphasizing the ecotourism prospects. In this regard, the participant remarked that "Until now, we could not identify the carrying capacity of different spots in Sundarban. We follow the traditional practices of maximizing tourists' number with minimal entry fees to increase revenue. The ticket price is only 23 BDT including VAT. As a consequence, a large number of tourists encounter into the forest or particular spot at a time, which ultimately hampers the usual environment of the forest on a large scale." The participant later suggested increasing the entry fees with a ceiling on the number of tourists to ensure controlled

movement that must be followed by a government policy framework. Besides these, budgetary constraints also affect the development of proper tourism. For example, a forest department official (interview no. 1) added that:

Ecotourism is a continuous process. From 2002, we are trying to develop ecotourism concept in the Sundarbans but due to budget constraint, we could not do much. To protect the walkway inside the forest, we are trying to make the basement with cement, and we will cover that with wood considering ecotourism demands of nature-bonding. However, due to budgetary constraint, the work progress is very slow. I think to remove this problem, government, non-government, and research organization need to work in collaboration and cooperation.

As indicated in the quote, a coordinated effort is thus required for the development of Sundarbans as an ecotourism destination. Alongside, the promotion of a destination is also important for the tourists to gather the relevant information before travelling. In this regard the participants especially, the tourists and tour operators, raised the issue of promotion. People know the Sundarbans as a world heritage site; however, the extent of promotion it should get as a promising tourists' destination is insufficient in comparison to other destinations. Some promotional efforts were given by the tour operators on a very limited scale, in most of the cases at their respective websites only.

5.3 Dominance of wealthy urban elites

Realizing the prospects for accommodation and restaurant businesses, entrepreneurs from the neighboring districts and capital city have started constructing hotels and restaurants. It has been argued that they are charging an excessively high price, a particular concern for budget tourists. Accordingly, one participant (interview no. 9) claimed that "There is no available accommodation facility nearby Sundarbans. So, we have to stay in Khulna or Sathkhira. Khulna city has a good number of accommodations such as City Inn, Castle Salam, and Royal Hotel targeting tourists in this region, but they charge a very high price." Considering accommodation as a fixed cost, most of the tourists want it at a reasonable cost. This directly create impacts on the budget of a tourist and thereby tentative duration of a tour. Furthermore, the distance to a destination remains a deciding factor while choosing an accommodation. In this vein, ill practices by urban elites are noteworthy as one tour operator (interview no. 8) commented:

Tourists could not halt night in Sundarban. However, they prefer to stay closer to the destination or targeted site. Taking this as opportunity, some well-off people of Bagerhat have started hotel businesses to serve tourists. It is a matter of regret that those facilities are providing very poor services in comparison to the amount they are charging. There is no basin or good sanitation. Tourists do not feel comfortable yet they are helpless.

Such a practice of providing minimum facilities on a maximum price is resulting tourist dissatisfaction, which in turn is affecting the overall destination image negatively and limiting repeated customer base. Furthermore, the inclusion of local people in tourism development has long been an important issue to be addressed. However, the local involvement in tourism operation seems very limited in this context. On this note, criticizing the wealthy urban elites, one participant (interview no. 10) argued that:

The number of local and foreign tourists are increasing day by day. Realizing this phenomenon, many urban people have started their careers as tour operators. You may find nearly 100 tour operators in Khulna city who arrange tours to Sundarban. They only hire a boat and manage land transportation to boat a 'ghat' (landing station, hub). They don't bother at all about the community people or how the visitation could improve local livelihood.

Such an exclusion of the local people clearly indicates an income leakage to the outsiders, which may in the long run create antagonism among local people. However, the inclusion of the local people ultimately contributes to the individual employment on one hand and the overall inclusive development on the other hand. This is inevitable to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

5.4 Fraudulent Intermediaries

The deceitful activities by many tourism-related intermediaries are significant problems for tourism development in the Sundarbans. For instance, some unethical tour guides and tour operators cheat tourists, which spreads over word-of-mouth and ultimately generates disapproving attitudes in planning a trip to such destination. A tour operator (interview no. 8) observed this a particular threat for those who are doing business with ethics and credibility. As such the participant asserted:

In recent years, a problem becomes evident that actually working against tourism development in Sundarban. Some people are providing eye-catching advertisements, and communicate with people as tour operators and/or tour guides. In practice, they don't have any license. In many cases, after taking money from tourists, they cheat them with their fraud existence. They take advance from tourists, but when tourists reach Khulna, they (Tourists) cannot find them.

This view is equally acknowledged by another tour operator (interview no. 4), one tourist (interview no. 12),

and local people (interview no. 5 and 10). All these participants gave a consensus opinion highlighting the supervision and monitoring roles of public institutions.

5.5 Lack of Awareness of the Local People

It has been claimed that the local people are being deprived of the benefits from tourism. Several participants (interview no. 3, 5, and 10) argued that the local people of Sundarbans are hardly aware of the opportunities in tourism. Illiteracy has been argued as one of the primary causes of such unawareness. The researchers' observations also evidence such issue during the course of different interview sessions. One community participant (interview no. 5) noted:

I don't think that local people are aware of the ecotourism prospect of Sundarban. Most of them are not literate, and they depend on the forest for their livelihood. They cut trees and illegally use resources of the forest to fulfil their daily necessity.

Involvement in tourism may provide alternative livelihood means whereby employment opportunities can be enhanced, which in turn will reduce dependency on the forest resources. In this way, tourism can act as a tool to promote the environmental conservation practices. Admitting this, one institutional participant (interview no. 13) has identified creation of awareness among the local people bears utmost importance and commented accordingly that "... Main barrier is lack of awareness and tourism knowledge. It is difficult for anyone to get involved in any sector in which he/she does not have a clear understanding." The responsibilities for creating awareness were observed through a joint effort of public and private initiatives.

5.6 Training and Education for the Relevant Stakeholders

A training need of the relevant stakeholders including local people, tourists, and the transport providers for the proper tourism development has been emphasized by numerous participants in this research. This is argued that training and education would generate better understanding of tourism among different parties involved in ecotourism development and practices. An institutional participant representing a national tourism organization (interview no. 13) highlighted the lack of capability of community people and asserted:

The undergoing tourism practices here can hardly be addressed as ecotourism. To practice ecotourism, local people must have to be accommodated and engaged with alternative activities. In cooperation of the Forest Department, a small-scale operation is going but the locals' capacities remain a great concern.

The training need has been emphasized on the ground of delivering quality experiences to a tourist. This has been particularly discussed in connection with the opportunity of 'home stay' services. For example, one tour operator said that: "... To realize home stay opportunity, local people must be provided training of cooking and preparation of a room for the tourists. Such training would enhance their ability to serve tourists and enhance confidence to consider this as an alternative profession."

Alongside community people, the need for educating tourists has been equally emphasized under the consideration of lack of responsible tourist behavior. Addressing this issue, one participant from Forest Department (interview no. 1) commented that: "There are no specific guidelines for tourists over there. Tourists sometimes create noise and throw waste haphazardly, which negatively affect forest environments." To foster educated tourist base, the need for knowledgeable tour guides with enough understanding of local geography and topography has been suggested. Besides these, employees serving other relevant operating sectors of tourism e.g., transportation must have to be properly trained for tourism development in the Sundarbans.

5.7 Support from Local Authorities

Insufficient support of the local authorities has been identified as a critical factor for tourism development. This remains significant since the ultimate tourism experiences happen at local or destination level. A tour operator (interview no. 8) has claimed that "According to our expectation, we get only 25% support from the local authorities, forest departments, coast guards, and naval authorities. This 25% itself includes the regular invigilation of coast guards." (Interview no.12). However, institutional participants (interview no. 1, 11, and 13) to some extent defended the role of institutions highlighting the lack of available staffs and bureaucratic difficulties to foster coordination across organizations. The deficiency of staffs was also found in the statement of a tour operator (interview no. 4) who mentioned that "In the case of security, we do not get more than two security guards though the number of tourists is high." On the other side, lack of internal coordination due to bureaucratic practices was also acknowledge by the participant as he/she noted that "Recently a decision was taken that the boat/ship towards Sundarban will be checked first at the Khulna Coast Guard Office and if they clear it, then it could move further. This seems a problem for tourists and us too because it delays the trip." In addition, unfriendly or unwelcoming attitude of the coast guards and local Forest Department's employees was mentioned by a couple of tourist participants (interview no. 6 and 12).

5.8 Security

A secure tourist environment is a prerequisite for tourism development. On this note, the Sundarbans as a secured tourist destination remains contested. This has been reflected in the observations of various participant categories in this research. In general, political instability and extortion practices by the pirates were frequently discussed. For example, a tourist (interview no. 2) stated that: "Political instability is an influential factor that can act as an obstacle for smooth tourism development. A few days ago, the unrest political situation including prolonged hartal (strike) restricted our trip plan". Apart from the macro environmental situation, destination-oriented factor such as pirating practices has raised severe concern for potential tourists, which is mentioned in numerous interview sessions. However, the government has officially declared the Sundarbans as a pirate-free area in 2018, which can help improving the destination's image perception to tourists.

6. Discussions and Implications

The current study findings indicate that infrastructural constraints in terms of transport, accommodation, and other essential services are some of the core hindrances against tourism development in the Sundarbans. Several studies (Henderson, 2011, Seetanah et al., 2016, Smith, 1994, Ritchie and Crouch, 2000) in varying contexts similarly identified the inevitability of appropriate tourism infrastructures for tourism development. Henderson (2011) argued that the lack of proper infrastructure contributes to the perceived negative image of a destination's visitors, especially to the international visitors. Seetanah et al. (2016) correspondingly found that tourists are sensitive to the infrastructure of a destination. It has been evident in particular that tourists' decision to visit a destination is governed by the quality of transport system (Khadaroo and Seetanah, 2008). The study identified any inconvenience in a transport system such as irrational prices, long and uncomfortable journey may lead tourists to alter their decisions regarding preferred destination. Besides transport, accommodation is also of great importance in tourism as the nature and extent of accommodation are important determinants of the level of tourism development in a destination (Gunasekaran and Anadkumar, 2012; Jovanic` and Ilic` 2016; Nuntsu, Tassiopoulos, and Haydam, 2003). Jovanic` and Ilic` (2016) argued that a higher level of tourism infrastructure contributes to the increased efficiency of production and distribution of tourism services. Hence, the development of tourism friendly infrastructure is crucial for the development of Sundarbans as a standard tourism destination.

The participation of local people and tourism stakeholder in the decision-making process is essential for appropriate tourism development, which remains largely absent in the Sundarbans context. Tosun (2000, 2003) argued local participation as an enabler of sustainable tourism development that would create better opportunities for destination communities. Such an inclusion of local people, on the other hand, would develop a positive attitude of the local people towards the development of tourism and conservation of natural resources (Inskip, 1994). This is crucial considering the fragile ecology of Sundarbans. Since local people of Sundarbans are mostly dependent on the forests, their readiness in commencing tourism related micro enterprises or relationships with tourism businesses is limited. The local people of Sundarbans are traditionally dependent on the forests. They need to be informed about the alternative options for income generation through tourism. Thus, preparing the local community is necessary for their involvement in the tourism sector. This would establish tourism as an alternative livelihood means along with other available options (Tao and Wall, 2009). The local authority and local elected representatives have influence over the local people, these parties can be used to motivate community people. Additionally, the government and the non-government organizations (NGOs) can undertake awareness program in conjunction with the tourism organizations and local authorities that can help local people to realize the income generating possibilities from tourism-related activities. Local people can be given financial and technical support so that they can be well linked with tourism-related activities in order to ensure sustainable growth in this context.

While admitting the importance of stakeholders' involvement, Tosun (2000) argued that the empowerment and the ability of the relevant stakeholders to participate in the tourism-related decisions to some extent depends on their level of education. In line with this observation, tourism development in the Sundarbans is confined chiefly by the low literacy rate. Subsequently, the communities lack knowledge to influence or control the local tourism development process. Moreover, coordination and sharing among the relevant stakeholders have been reported feebly but these are inevitable for the holistic development of a destination. Therefore, creation of opportunities for learning and knowledge sharing among the stakeholders are important within an institutional environment (Wray, 2011).

The dominance of wealthy elites and the intermediaries in tourism is a common phenomenon (Walpole and Goodwin, 2001). It is evident from the study that there are no direct linkages between local people, local authority, and tourism businesses in the studied context. Local people are weak in terms of finance and knowledge about the tourism industry. To reduce the dominance of wealthy elites of other areas, government should intervene the market. If tourism is to be a positive force for development, it must prioritize and involve mass people.

On top of everything, absence of effective planning and management of tourism is a major drawback for tourism development in the context of Sundarban. The above-mentioned issues can be addressed within a planning framework. Jamal and Getz (1995) argued that lack of collaboration and cohesion is very common among a destination planners and managers. In the context of Sundarban, lack of such coordination was observed among different relevant stakeholders. In this regard, Hall (1998) advocated the necessity for an overall integrative framework for planning that incorporates objectives and strategies to attain desired goals. Thus, proper planning involving the relevant stakeholders seems crucial for the Sundarbans. In Bangladesh, important government organizations related to tourism development are fundamentally urban oriented. In order to develop tourism, these organizations need to be decentralized.

Moreover, there should be coordination between different private and government parties. Lickorish and Jenkins (1999) in acknowledging the applicability of close cooperation with the commercially related functions in tourism, accentuated the responsibility of a government and/or public institutions. Accordingly, government intervention or willingness has been found a necessity to generate broader benefits from tourism development (Devine and Devine, 2011). This is particularly important to control destination specific external forces such as political instability and extortion practices by pirates.

7. Conclusion

This study explores a number of factors that act against tourism development within a forest-based destination. It has been evident that lack of planning is restricting overall tourism development in the Sundarbans, which is the largest mangrove forest in the world. Improper infrastructures, lack of community engagement, requirement of education and training, support from local authorities, and security are few issues that can be addressed through proper planning. Planning is usually prepared by relevant public bodies. In this regard, inputs from the private parties are also equally important. Besides planning, government willingness to stabilize political instability is essential since it holds the legitimate power to establish political stability, security, and legal framework to foster tourism development. Correspondingly, this research concludes the obligation for government interventions into the market mechanism is a must criterion for tourism development in a developing country like Bangladesh where decisions flow down rigidly from the top. However, under the guidance and direction of the government, involvement of private sectors is equally important. Future research may focus on a particular challenge (as identified in this research) to investigate in details and generate more specific findings along with possible recommendations.

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