

# **Social, Economic and Environmental Sustainability: The Implications to Develop Sustainable Tourism in Bangladesh**

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## **Abstract**

Bangladesh is a country with both natural and cultural resources that can be developed as tourist destinations. The country has enormous prospects in tourism industry, but this industry is not well managed. This study aimed to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of tourism industry in Bangladesh from a sustainability perspective to explore the potential implications of developing sustainable tourism. A qualitative case study design was undertaken for this paper. This study applied the core concept of sustainability for the data analysis. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with 20 tourism- related key professionals and tourists. Using a qualitative content analysis technique, we find that the country has immense opportunities to create jobs for youths, promote local culture, encourage local entrepreneurship, and above all increase economic benefits through developing sustainable tourism, which can also contribute to achieving the targets of Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism, SWOT analysis, Adaptation tourism, Bangladesh, Sustainable development goals.

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## **1. Introduction**

Tourism comprises a wide range of economic activities and is recognized as one of the largest industries of the world (Neto, 2003); it has the potential to contribute to socio-economic development (Petrevska, 2012), especially in a developing country, like Bangladesh. Recently, this industry has been prioritized by the government of Bangladesh. The contribution of this industry is reflected in several policy documents of the government, notably the National Tourism Policy (2010), the Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-2020), and the Prospective Plan of Bangladesh 2010-2021: Making Vision 2021 A Reality. The Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-2020) for Bangladesh emphasizes development a competitive tourism industry by 2020 (Planning Commission, 2015) and increasing its contribution to the Gross Domestic

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Products (GDP) to 5% by 2021 (Planning Commission, 2012). The direct contribution of travel and tourism to GDP in Bangladesh was only 2.4% (BDT. 407.6 billion; 1 USD = BDT. 78.4 in July 2016), to employment 2.0% (1.4 million jobs) and 1.2% of total investment (BDT. 61.6 billion) in 2015 (World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2016). The share of foreign exchange earnings by this industry increased from BDT. 2451 million in 1999 to BDT. 12273 million in 2014 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2015). Therefore, this industry has a great potential to generate employment, increase foreign exchange earnings and overall contribution to the economic growth of the country. To reap these benefits, sustainable growth of this industry is a must. Sustainable tourism is an approach that aims to develop and manage tourism-related interventions and services in a manner that preserves the originality of the places to be visited, provide benefits to local communities, and conserve natural and cultural resources that can attract tourist to attractive destinations to visit (United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], 2005). The concept of sustainable tourism has gradually become an important determinant for destinations that depend on nature for their major tourist attraction (Larson & Herr, 2008).

Tourism is a fast-growing sector (UNEP, 2005) in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, empirical studies on sustainable tourism in Bangladesh are very limited. The majority of the studies that exist focus on ecotourism. Haque, Reza, Alam, Ahmed & Islam (2016) studied potential benefits and challenges to develop sustainable ecotourism in the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, Bangladesh. The improvement of tourism products of the country may generate good perception in the tourists' mind-set (Ishtiaque, 2012). But substantial efforts should be made to develop the kind of tourism that can stimulate development, and lead to environmental and cultural protection, gender equality, and export diversification in services (Honeck & Akhtar, 2014). The nexus between tourist micro-enterprises and the alleviation of poverty in rural Bangladesh was studied by Islam & Carlsen (2012). A nature-oriented tourism model was proposed to monitor the adverse impact of tourism in the reserve forest of Sundarbans, using geographical information systems (GIS) technology by Salam, Lindsay and & Beveridge (2000). The perception of visitors were explored in different tourist destinations, including Kaptai National Park (Rahman, Roy, Anik, & Fardusi, 2013), and Cox's Bazar (Hossain, Quaddus, & Shanka, 2013). Alam, Furukawa & Akter (2010) identified different strengths and impediments in developing forest-based tourism using strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) matrix. The concept of sustainable tourism has been used in several studies. Jahan & Amin (2014) have identified numerous social, cultural, environmental, economical and political

factors that affect the sustainability of the Sylhet region. Attempts have also been made to identify the strengths and weakness of this industry (Shamsuddoha & Chowdhury, 2009; Mondal, 2017a). No attempts were made to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of tourism industry from a sustainable development perspective. Therefore, this study explores the following questions, using an empirical qualitative inquiry:

- What are the socio-cultural, economic and environmental strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to the tourism industry of Bangladesh?
- What are the possible ways to develop sustainable tourism industry using SWOT?
- How can 'sustainable tourism' help to achieve sustainable development?

This qualitative case study formulated an understanding of existing strengths and opportunities, as well as identified several weaknesses and threats related to the tourism industry that may hinder the successful growth of this industry. The following section discusses the conceptual frame of this study. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are described from a sustainability perspective in the subsequent section (results and discussion section). The article concludes with the implications of this study, and underscores future priorities to develop the sustainable tourism industry in the country.

## **2. Conceptual Framework of the Study**

Sustainable development has been defined by the Brundtland Report as 'the development that meets the need and demand of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland, 1987). The idea of sustainability integrates economic, social and environmental aspects.

Sustainable tourism development involves balanced social, economic and cultural development without endangering the environment, which enables the development of the same or higher level (Angelevska-Najdeska & Rakicevik, 2012). United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO] (2017) defines sustainable tourism as 'tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities'. Major influences on sustainable tourism have also included more broad reaching agreements, strategies and international meetings related to sustainability, including World Conservation Strategy 1980, Brandt Commission Report 1980, World Tourism Organization Manila Declaration 1980, UNEP/WTO Accord 1982, the Brundtland Report, 1987,

and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED-Earth Summit) in 1992 (Romeril, 1989; Richins, 2009). The 2030 Global Agenda for development has also acknowledged the contribution of the tourism industry to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 (United Nations, 2018). Three targets of three different goals of SDGs directly relate to tourism industry; these are as follows (United Nations, 2018) (Table 1):

Table 1: Indicators on sustainable tourism in SDGs (Source: United Nations 2018)

Goal	Target
Goal 8	8.9: By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products
Goal 12	12.b: Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products
Goal 14	14.7: By 2030, increase the economic benefits to small island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism

Therefore, SDGs calls for implementing policies on sustainable tourism; creates jobs, promote local cultures and products; and increase economic benefits through sustainable tourism (United Nations, 2018).

Sustainability in tourism has three interrelated issues, viz, environmental, socio-cultural, and economic and it aims at preventing or minimizing ecological, cultural and social impacts (UNEP, 2005). Sustainable tourism is not a type of tourism, instead, a condition of tourism which is based on the principles of sustainable development (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). This approach may offer high quality tourist satisfaction, improve quality of life involving local communities (UNEP, 2005).

### 3. Objective of the Study

Bangladesh is gifted with evergreen hills, long sandy beaches, luxuriant tropical rain forests, and a rich cultural heritage (Islam & Nath, 2014). The unique biogeography of the country may be an important factor in augmenting global tourism demand. Many people might be surprised to learn it has three World Heritage sites (Honeck & Akhtar, 2014). However, this industry is not fully flourished; rather, it is in a developing stage (Alam,

Furukawa & Akter, 2010). This industry is growing in an unplanned and haphazard way. On the one hand, uncontrolled expansion of tourism is likely to cause environmental degradation, but on the other, environmental degradation associates with tourism activities pose serious problems to tourism-rich regions (Neto, 2003). It is necessary to develop sustainable tourism industry. Thus, the objective of study was to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of tourism industry in Bangladesh from a sustainability perspective to explore the potential implications of developing sustainable tourism.

#### 4. Methodology

The author employed a qualitative case story approach for this study. Such an approach is very useful tool in studying complex phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This study also uses descriptive case study techniques to describe the phenomena.

Table 2: Background of the respondents

Background of the respondents	Number of respondents	Respondents code	Age (years)	Remarks
Academicians	n= 15	R1 to R 15	Age range: 30 to 55; Average age: 42.2 years	Both from public and private universities
Independent consultant	n= 1	R 16	46 years	More than 15 years of experience in the tourism industry
Tour operators	n= 2	R17, R 18	Age range: 34 to 47, Average age: 40.5 years	Have long experience in tour operations
Travelers(service holders)	n= 2	R 19, R 20	Age range: 28 to 30, Average age: 29 years	At least one tour in a quarter
Total	N= 20			

A survey was conducted by the author to collect data for this study. It was conducted in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. There was no sampling frame for this study. To identify respondents, the author used the purposive random sampling technique. The author also applied snowball sampling tool to identify 80% (n=12) of academics. Snowball sampling is very useful when researcher need to locate hard-to-find population, or when the sampling frame is unavailable, or to identify the hidden population (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). The author purposively included the majority of the respondents (75% of total respondents) from academic institutions. The reason behind this overrepresentation of academicians is that the concept of sustainable tourism is relatively new in the country. The author believes that academics have more knowledge about sustainable tourism than other respondent groups. Data were collected during the 3rd and 4th week of January 2017. The interview was conducted first in Bengali and has then translated in to English.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 20 individuals (details of the respondents are given in Table 2) using checklists. Face-to-face interview techniques with the respondents' were adopted. The detail methodological follow chart has given given in Figure 1.

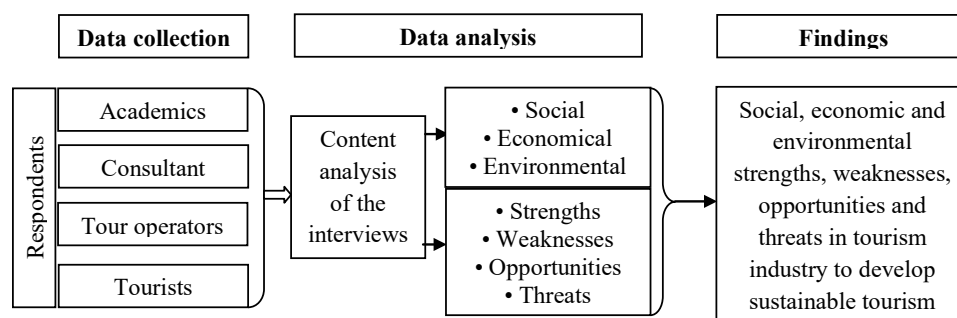


Figure 1: Methodological flow chart

The author took informed consent from all respondents before the interview and applied both traditional (note taking) and scientific (recording of interview) methods of interview data collection. A voice recorder was used to record the discussions with the permission of all interviewees. In the end, the data collected were analyzed and presented as thick description with juxtaposition. The texts were segregated into the SWOT matrix from social-cultural, economic and environmental perspectives. To maintain the confidentiality and privacy of respondents, the author de-identified the names from their quotes (Mondal, 2017b).

## 5. Analysis and Discussion of Results

The results from this study were presented using SWOT matrix (Table 3). The following section describes these factors from socio-cultural, economic and environmental point of views.

### 5.1 Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats of the Bangladesh Tourism Industry

#### 5.1.1 Strengths in Tourism Industry

**A. Environmental:** Bangladesh has a subtropical monsoon climate and experiences heavy rainfall in the rainy season, high temperature in the summer and moderate cool in the winter. This seasonal rhythm clearly indentifies distinct rainy, summer and winter seasons. The northern region of the country is located near the foothills of Himalaya and the southern zone is exposed to the Bay of Bengal. The topography of the country is steeply downhill from the northern region to the southern region. The country has greenery and unique natural beauty with distinguishing faunal and floristic composition, including a large river network (Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna river system). The country is also blessed with the longest sea beach of the world in Cox's Bazar (155 km long sea beach); the largest contiguous mangrove forest (Sundarbans mangrove forest has been recognized as an United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] World Heritage Site); and tertiary hills in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet. As a result of the flat topography, most tourist spots can be reached within 6 to 12 hours by road or on water ways from Dhaka. Its natural resources should make this country one of the most appealing destination spots of the world. The country also has abundant sunny days. These physical characteristics indicate huge potentiality for developing natural tourism. According to one respondent:

*'We have unique seasonal rhythms, comfortable climate, longest sandy sea beach, largest mangrove forest, and tertiary hills'. (Respondent: R 11)*

**B. Socio-Cultural:** Bangladesh is full of with UNESCO declared world cultural heritage sites, such as, including 'Ruins of the Buddhist Monastery, Paharpur, and 'Historic Mosque City, Bagerhat'. The country also has several ancient archaeological remains, such as Lalbagh Fort, Mahansthagarh, Kantanagar Temple, Halud Vihara, Lalmai-Mainamati monuments, Jaggadala Vihara, Wari Bateshwar and many more. These ancient remnants represent Islam, Buddhist and Hindu religion. The country has a distinctive Bengali culture with strong religious harmony among the people. As per the respondent:

*'The country has a long historical background. The traditional and cultural features of the country are unparalleled in the world.'* (Respondent: R 6)

Bangladeshi people are very simple and hospitable to guests. They have their unique traditions to satisfy their guests. Bengali cuisine is also unique for its culinary style. Moreover, solemnization of colorful holidays and religious festivals bring all segments of people under a common platform. According to one respondent:

*'Bangladeshi people and cuisine are really unique in the world'* (Respondent: R 4)

Bangladeshi handicrafts have become very popular in both at home and abroad. Different geographical regions of the country are famous for their diverse handicrafts that represent rural livelihoods of the country. The most common craft products are *Nokshikatha* (embroidered quilt), *Sital Pati* (one type of mat which is made from cane and possesses natural cooling effect), bags, wall hangings, baskets, potteries, cushions, dresses, toys, carpets, terracotta, traditional jewelries, silk products, woven clothes, and many more. All these products are made from environment-friendly raw materials such as jute, bamboo, coconut shells, cane, wood, straw, natural fibers, and so on. Bangladesh has received geographical identification (GI) of *Jamdani Sari* (one of the finest cloth with decorative motifs) which has international demand. As one academic has informed:

*'Bangladeshi handicrafts and handlooms have worldwide reputation. A sustainable business strategy might help both local communities as well as other stakeholders. The most important thing to rate is that we have already received GI of Jamdani Sari.'* (Respondent: R 14)

**C. Economic:** The government is eager to promote the tourism sector of the country. To do so, the government has formulated the 'National Tourism Policy 2010' and has taken several tourist friendly measures, including 'visa on arrival policy' and conditional 'no visa required' policy. As a result, investment in this industry has been increasing. According to one respondent:

*'Developing sustainable tourism requires strong willingness from the government. One of the important aspects is that the government has already acknowledged the contribution of the tourism industry for the development of the country.'* (Respondent: R 16).

The economic growth of a country depends on the supply of youth labour forces. Bangladesh has now abundant labor forces. The percentage of working group people (15-59 years) to the total population has crossed 64%



Table 3: Environmental, Socio-cultural and Economic Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of Tourism Industry

	Environmental	Socio-cultural	Economic
<b>Strengths</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different appealing tourist spots</li> <li>• Unique biodiversity with fascinating natural beauty and greenery</li> <li>• Mostly flat topography (80% of total land) with tertiary hills (12% of total land)</li> <li>• Abundant sunny days for natural tourism</li> <li>• Distinct rainy, winter and summer season</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNESCO declared cultural heritages</li> <li>• Ancient archeological remnants</li> <li>• Religious harmony</li> <li>• Unique Bengali culture</li> <li>• Local people are very hospitable and tourist friendly</li> <li>• Colorful festivals for all religions</li> <li>• Unique traditional handicrafts and handlooms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive attitude of government to promote tourism</li> <li>• Investment in tourism is increasing</li> <li>• Abundant young labor force supply</li> </ul>
<b>Weakness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate initiatives to protect natural environment</li> <li>• Improper management of natural resources</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge to develop sustainable tourism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate safety and security for tourists</li> <li>• Political biasness to regional development</li> <li>• Absence of separate ministry on tourism</li> <li>• Limited community participation in tourism project development</li> <li>• Lack of organizational coordination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient fund to conservation tourist spots</li> <li>• Poor infrastructure and weak investment base</li> <li>• Fails to attract brilliant business professionals</li> <li>• Lack of representation of other disciplines professionals</li> <li>• High profit motive attitudes</li> <li>• Inadequate management of tourist products</li> <li>• Underdeveloped tourism marketing and supply chains</li> </ul>

	Environmental	Socio-cultural	Economic
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop nature tourism</li> <li>• Monitoring and conservation of natural ecosystems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing numbers in domestic tourism</li> <li>• Develop pilgrimage and cultural tourism</li> <li>• Favorable government policies to attracts young and NRB business professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop explicit marketing strategies</li> <li>• Opportunity to promote community level entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Mobilization of locally available resources and diversification economic activities</li> <li>• Employment generation at local level</li> <li>• More attractive and competitive local tourist products</li> </ul>
<b>Threats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsustainable extraction of natural resources</li> <li>• Destroy vulnerable natural ecosystems</li> <li>• Smuggling of ecosystem resources</li> <li>• Natural disasters may hinder tourism industry</li> <li>• Changes in landcover and landuse by executing mega tourism projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alien culture entry to manage mass tourism</li> <li>• Political turmoil and militant attacks</li> <li>• Trade or labor union menaces</li> <li>• Lack of political commitment by the political parties</li> <li>• Favorable tourism policies of neighborhood countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big investments may fail optimum returns</li> <li>• Inadequate fund may hamper tourism expansion and branding</li> </ul>

in 2015 compared to 50% in 1970 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division [UNDESA], 2017). This transition in age structure offers a new window of opportunity for economic growth of the country. This economic dividend can be reaped through engaging working age people in the productive works. Government jobs are limited in Bangladesh and government is incapable of absorbing these huge youth labor forces into the formal jobs sectors. These large number of youth pool is one of the major strengths of the country who can be engaged in tourism sector. According to one respondent:

*'Bangladesh is now running through demographic dividend. We have a large number of youth people. We could engage them in tourism industry development. This will help us to solve the unemployment problem of the country. (Respondent: 01)*

### 5.1.2 Weaknesses in Tourism Industry

**A. Environmental:** Conservation of natural resources and heritages are important determinants of sustainable tourism. Natural resources and habitats are being destroyed because of inadequate awareness on the protection of the environment. According to one academic:

*The major drawback in developing sustainable tourism industry is knowledge on natural resources conservation. People have limited understanding of sustainable tourism. Often people conceptualize this approach (sustainable tourism) from the economic aspect only.'* (Respondent: 15)

**B. Socio-Cultural:** Safety and security determine the number of domestic as well as inbound tourists. Inadequate safety and security discourages tourists to visit a country or even a region. Hijacking and snatching of tourists valuables are common in Bangladesh. Some recent terrorists' attacks have led reduction in the number of inbound tourists in Bangladesh. According to one respondent:

*'I was roaming around the Chittagong city at around 9 pm. I was suddenly attacked by some hijackers. They snatched away my wallet and mobile phone.'* (Respondent: 19)

Lack of political commitment often leads to regional bias. As a result, prospective tourists' spots are being overlooked. For example, the northern region of the country is renowned for its archaeological monuments, and the potentiality to develop rural tourism, agricultural tourism, nature tourism, winter tourism, as well as cultural and historical tourism. Unfortunately, this region is not well recognized as a tourist destination due to lack of promotional activities by policymakers. There is no separate ministry for

the promotion of the tourism industry. At present, this industry is under the 'Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism'. According to one respondent:

*'I love the natural beauty of north Bengal. There are many unexplored cultural relics here. Unfortunately, these areas are not tourist friendly.'* (Respondent: 20)

Local communities' participation has always been overlooked in the country. Decisions are, therefore, made behind closed doors. Such a top-down approach fails to address the interest of local communities. Most of the nature conservation projects of the country have failed because of limited community engagement. According to one consultant:

**C. Economic:** Bangladesh has faced serious funding crisis in trying to conserve its natural resources. Most conservation interventions in the past depended largely on foreign donations. The tourist infrastructure of the country is not well developed. Tourist spots are not often well- managed, due to funding constraints. According to one respondent:

*'Poor road network, weak transport connectivity, uncomfortable transport, unsatisfactory hotels and lodging services are some of the weaknesses of this industry.'* (Respondent: 03)

Although tourism industry of the country has ample potentiality, investment in this industry is still considered to be high-risk. The weak financing base often discourages business professionals from marketing tourist products. This industry also fails to draw the attention of brilliant business professionals. It industry fails to engage environmental professionals. As a result, issue related to the environment is mostly overlooked in project development. Furthermore, empirical research on tourism is still quite inadequate. As stated by one academic:

*'To develop the sustainable tourism industry, the policymakers should consult with all relevant stakeholders, including academics, such as economists, environmentalists and socialists.'* (Respondent: 07)

High- profiting attitude is another drawback of this industry. Tourism products (such as hotels rooms, travels, foods) are very expensive in Bangladesh compared to those neighboring countries. As a result, domestic tourists tend to spend their holidays abroad. According to a respondent:

*'I am a frequent traveler at both home and abroad. But tourism is more expensive in Bangladesh than in to neighboring countries (India, Nepal and Bhutan) and East Asian countries (Thailand & Malaysia). I often spend my holidays abroad. Food, accommodation and transport costs in some*

Sustainable tourism aims to promote local economy and encourage tourists to purchase locally made products. Unfortunately, most tourist products in most destinations are not locally made. As one respondent observed:

*'You will hardly find local product in tourist spots. I visited Cox's Bazar and Rangamati the last winter. I was trying to purchase some gifts for my family. I found that most of the goods available were made in Myanmar (locally known as 'Burmese product.' (Respondent: R 19)*

Tourist spots and hotels of the country are not properly designed and managed. Services offered are not always tourist friendly. There might be several reasons behind these dissatisfactions, including inadequate tour operators, and lack of training and knowledge on tourists demand management. Now-a-days, tourists want to get requisite information on destinations from their origins. But website based information on tourist products of the country are inadequate and backdated. Most of the information on tourist products are in Bengali. According to one consultant:

*'Tourism marketing and supply chains are not properly developed. Tour operators cannot offer lucrative destination packages for domestic and foreign tourists. They have inadequate knowledge about selling tourism products, and mostly rely on unconventional marketing strategies. These factors rated lower level of tourist satisfactions.' (Respondents: R 16)*

### 5.1.3 Opportunities in Tourism Industry

**A. Environmental:** Bangladesh has diversified biotic and abiotic natural resources, distinct seasonal rhythms, and unique geographical variations. These diversities are well enough to develop nature based tourism, including winter tourism in the northern region, beach tourism in the coastal zone (e.g. Cox's Bazar, Kuakata), forest tourism (mangrove forests, deciduous forests and evergreen forests), agro tourism, and river tourism. As one respondent notes:

*'We have ample prospect to develop nature- based tourism, we can even have the benefit of our large and wide river network and can establish river cuisine.' (Respondent: 02)*

Bangladesh is one of the most climate vulnerable countries of world and has already experienced some adverse effects of climate change on the lives and livelihoods of its people. But the people of the country have been developing their own strategies to adapt to adverse climatic conditions. The country is a role model of climate adaptation. These adaptation models could be sold as tourist products. Therefore, the country also has the opportunity to materialize

‘adaptation tourism’ as a tourist product. Sustainable tourism is considered the most desirable form of tourism development in particular reception areas, especially one that preserve the most natural and cultural authenticity values (Butowski, 2012). Planning of sustainable tourism development actually concerns planning to preserve the environment (Angelevska-Najdeska & Rakicevik, 2012). Chronological changes in landcover of tourist spots can be monitored by using remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Real time monitoring might help policymakers to adapt well-managed environment conservation decisions. Moreover, communities will be vigilant about protecting nature spot if they can understand that they will benefit from doing so. According to an interviewee:

*‘Sustainable tourism not only creates economic opportunity but also promotes conservation of natural ecosystems. If communities get benefits from sustainable tourism practices, they will also take the responsibility to conserve their environment.’ (Respondent: 05)*

**B. Socio-Cultural:** There is a growing interest in domestic tourism among locals. This is a great opportunity for tourism stakeholders to keep up the influx of tourists by improving the quality of tourist spots as well as services. As a respondent observes:

*‘The good news is that the number of domestic travelers has increased in the last few years. Tourism stakeholders should utilize this opportunity for the sustainable growth of this industry.’ (Respondent: 10)*

Festival tourism is growing fast (Stankova & Vassenska, 2015). Festivals have the potential to provide opportunities for sustainable local economic development (O’Sullivan & Jackson, 2002). For Bangladesh such opportunities remain unexploited. Hundreds of religious and cultural festivals are observed by natives every year. The country has glorious archaeological remains of Buddhist dynasties. ‘Mosque based tourism’ and ‘festival tourism’ can also be promoted. The country could also host international events, including international sports events, workshops, seminars, and conferences to promote inbound tourism. According to a respondent:

*‘Bangladesh is a land of cultural diversity and has religious harmony. This country is also recognized as the foothills of Lord Buddha. There is an opportunity to develop and promote its Buddhist heritage for Buddhist pilgrims and non-Buddhists.’ (Respondent: 16)*

The Government of Bangladesh is eager to promote tourism industry. invest in tourism industry. Moreover, non-residence Bangladeshis (NRB) could be interested in investing in this industry with favorable government

policies. In addition, government should allocate sufficient funds for research and development in this sector. As per the respondent:

*'Government could attract youths and NRBs to invest in the tourism industry. It might play an important role in the successful growth of this industry.'* (Respondent: 17)

**C. Economic:** Explicit marketing largely depends on the use of branding and packaging. Bangladesh is now in the early stage of its tourism industry. Many tourist spots are still unexplored. There is ample opportunity to sell these tourist products through explicit marketing strategies, such as updating website information on tourist destinations, tour operators, facilities and services, and developing posters, brochures, pamphlet and leaflets on tourist spots for branding. The content of online and offline marketing strategy should be in English and Bengali to attract a wider audiences. According to one respondent:

*'We could do more to brand our tourist products. This will increase the number of domestic and inbound tourists.'* (Respondent: 18)

Sustainable tourism can promote community engagement and create opportunities to develop community level entrepreneurships. Community entrepreneurship might help to mobilize locally available resources through diversification of economic activities. Therefore, a community's interests can be well preserved through this approach. If we can ensure sustainability of the tourism industry, the benefit of tourism may not only bring enjoyment for tourists but, more importantly, maximize economic benefits and thus increase the living standards of host communities and countries (Neto, 2003). As one academic asserts:

*'Sustainable tourism is a win-win approach. Community level entrepreneurships will create more employment at the community level. As a result, communities will be benefitted directly through such entrepreneurship.'* (Respondent: 12)

#### **5.1.4 Threats to Tourism Industry**

**A. Environmental:** Unplanned and uncontrolled influx of tourists in ecologically vulnerable tourist spots (e.g. forests and archaeological sites) might destroy the environment. Excessive demands on tourist products can increase unsustainable natural resources extraction. In addition, smuggling of wildlife (deer, Bengal tiger, snake venom, and so forth), timbers, herbs and archaeological resources is a problem. As one respondent refers:

*'I am concerned about the unplanned expansion of tourism industry. Unplanned tourism can affect local environment badly. We need special care to*

*develop tourist spots in fragile ecosystems especially UNESCO declared natural and cultural heritages.* (Respondent: 08)

Development of tourism requires huge investments and infrastructures, including execution of mega tourism projects such as hotels, resorts, tourist spots, and so on. These interventions are associated with conversion of natural landscapes and agricultural lands. As a result, agricultural production may be hampered. According to an academic:

*'The reality is that government may permit to executing mega tourist projects without proper socio-economic and environmental impact assessment. These will hamper the motto of sustainability.'* (Respondent: 09)

Bangladesh is a disaster prone country and every year disaster visits it. Notable disasters are floods, cyclones, droughts, and so on. The socio-economic and environment losses and damages from such disasters are huge. Natural disasters pose major threats to the tourism industry. Private insurance markets for the damage of property and livelihoods by disasters do not exist in Bangladesh (Akter et al., 2011). An academic observes:

*'We do not have improved insurance policy for disaster losses. Community level investment might be washed away by disasters. It will be difficult to build back again.'* (Respondent: 09)

**B. Socio-Cultural:** Around 66% people of the country lived in rural areas in 2015 (World Bank, 2017). Most tourist spots of the country are located in the country sides and in hilly areas. Hill Tracts are homelands of majority of ethnic communities. Mass tourism may destroy ethnic and grassroots culture because of the invasion of alien culture. According to one respondent:

*'Sustainable tourism promotes local cultures. But how can we preserve local cultures? In general, we adopt foreign cultures too quickly.'* (Respondent: 04)

Political turmoil and terrorists attacks can be treated as the threats to the tourism industry. Political parties support trade and labor unions (including transport unions) threaten this industry. The government is often unable to control these unions. In addition, corruption of government officials and transition of government may affect the tourism industry. International geo-politics can hamper tourists' arrival. For example, recent terrorist incidents (e.g. Dhaka attack in July 2016) in some places defer tourists. One respondent asserts:

*'The number of foreign tourists has been decreasing in the last pentad. I would like to mention major two reasons, one is political and another Islamic militant attacks.'* (Respondent: 07)



In addition, the aviation industry of the country is not equipped adequately to manage mass tourism. Local transport systems are controlled by labor unions. Failing to control burgeoning trade and labor unrest may lead to mismanagement in the transport system. According to one respondent:

*'We need to recast the whole aviation industry and control different unions for the successful growth of tourism industry.'* (Respondent: 03)

Tourism policies of Nepal and India could also affect the tourism industry of Bangladesh. If these neighborhood countries adopt more tourist friendly policies, Bangladesh will be affected badly. According to one academic:

*'Bangladesh has to compete with India and Nepal. Tourism strategies of India and Nepal will influence us either positively or negatively.'* (Respondent: 13)

**C. Economic:** Tourism development requires huge investment and promotional activities. Inadequate funding may hamper physical expansion of tourist projects and marketing of tourist products. A respondent notes:

*'Big investments in tourism industry may fail to reap sustainable return to investors because of socio-cultural, political and environmental threats.'* (Respondent: 15)

## 6. Conclusion

This study classified SWOT factors into environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions. It is true Bangladesh has unique environmental and socio-cultural strengths, including unique geography, climate, biodiversity, culture relics and traditions that can be easily transformed into touristic elements. The country also has the opportunity to develop sustainable tourism using its scenic beauty and archaeological heritage. This industry can also generate employment as well as develop community level entrepreneurship. However, socio-cultural and economic weaknesses, such as political instability, inadequate branding, poor infrastructures and investments, and improper marketing strategies may limit growth of this industry. Uncontrolled and unplanned tourism are major threats for the tourism industry as well. Such threats could damage the natural environment through unsustainable resource extractions and socio-cultural environment because of the invasion of alien cultures. However, these weaknesses and threats could be tackled by ensuring security for travelers, better planning, strict environmental legislation, educating people, and infrastructure development. Above all, achieving sustainability in tourism industry requires systematic continuous monitoring.

The concept of sustainable tourism is at its infancy stage in Bangladesh. This study applied the sustainability concepts to identify the strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities and threats of tourism industry using qualitative inquiry. The tourism industry of the country is growing in an unmanageable way. On the other hand, the country can develop itself as an important tourist destination. Finally, the country has immense opportunities to create jobs for youths, promote local culture, encourage local entrepreneurships, and above all increase economic benefits through developing sustainable tourism which will contribute to achieving the targets of SDGs by 2030.

This empirical study provided an in-depth overview of SWOT to develop sustainable tourism industry in Bangladesh from a sustainability perspective. This study collected data from academics, tourism consultants, tour operators and tourists. It did not conduct any interview with government officials, who are among the key stakeholders of this industry. Moreover, another drawback of this study related to exclusion of local community's voice. Further study should engage all relevant stakeholders and may yield more interesting and robust findings thereby. Moreover, the sample size was also small. Therefore, caution is required before generalization of results. Nevertheless, this study will be particularly helpful for policymakers and other interested groups for better sustainable tourism planning. Indicators that were identified could also be used for future study.

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