

Tourism master plan again shelved following pandemic, other works underway

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Dhaka : A new tourism master plan for Bangladesh to facilitate the country's tourism industry in using its abundance of resources and potentials to flourish was scheduled to be prepared by June this year by the national tourism organisation Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB). However, this master plan for tourism, just like the previous ones of another NTO of the country Bangladesh Parja-tan Corporation, has been shelved as well, but temporarily.

This time, the concerned authorities has blamed the coronavirus pandemic hovering above us for nearly two years now for the delay in preparing the master plan aimed to take the country's tourism to new heights.

At a webinar organised on April 26 by the Bangladesh Tourism Board, the officials of the NTO explained, BTB began preparing the tourism master plan in January, 2020 and it was to be finished by June 30, 2021.

"We have been just unlucky to finish it. No one could have anticipated such a worldwide disaster which is the Covid-19 pandemic leaving us all around the globe helpless," said Javed Ahmed, CEO of Bangladesh Tourism Board. "But once done, it would bring the entire tourism industry of the country under a strict discipline as well as attract plenty more domestic, foreign and government investments to this sector, adding a new dimension to the tourism industry it sincerely deserves," he

added.

To our bad luck, last year in March, when the NTO initiated its works for the tourism master plan from the first district Bandarban, the foreign consultants involved in the project - three British and two French - had to leave the country due to the coronavirus pandemic which led to a halt in the preparation works.

Yet, BTB again took a chance at it, to resume the preparation works in November last year with 14 consultants of our own, without the foreign counterparts. In the first phase, BTB was to receive three feasibility studies for the master plan, once the officials involved in the project were done visiting all the districts of Bangladesh. However, they only received one because the master plan officials could only visit two divisions of the country so far - Khulna and Barishal - before suspending the works again following the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Nevertheless, this does not mean the NTO sat idle for two years amid the pandemic," said the Director of BTB Abu Tahir Zaber. At the webinar, the Director carried out a presentation detailing all that Bangladesh Tourism Board has done so far and is still working on to develop the tourism sector of the country.

Preparing other plans, policies, guidelines

Bangladesh Tourism Board is in progress to make several other plans, policies and guidelines to better equip the tourism industry to flourish.

One such step is the Tourism Human Capital Development Strategy 2021-2030 of BTB that is underway. The NTO has appointed an organisation of academics from tourism and hospitality management departments of various government and private universities in the country to prepare 22 policies under this strategy. This strategy is aimed to meet the policies and laws that the country's tourism sector lacks currently. The BTB Director has assured this strategy will be completed by the scheduled date of June this year as it does not require field work, rather more academic research.

Bangladesh Tourism Board is also carrying out another study called Impact of Covid-19 in Tourism: Assessment and Suggestion. For this, BTB has appointed Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). However, unfortunately, this study, like the master plan, might get delayed as it does require field work which is unlikely to happen amid the pandemic, said the BTB Director.

Promotional, distribution works

Bangladesh Tourism Board also carries out several promotional and distribution works to showcase the country's tourism potentials in the global arena, said Zaber, Director of the NTO.

Among others, BTB has created a web portal: www.beautifulbangladesh.gov.bd, only for promoting the country's tourism to visitors worldwide. The website contains photos and videos of all the tourism attractions found in 64 districts of Bangladesh.

To further aware visitors about the tourism and hospitality Bangladesh promises to serve prior to their arrival, BTB is also creating a database on tourism which will include information on all the subsectors of tourism as well - airlines, hotels, motels, transport, guide, tour operator, amusement park and so on. This will help tourists to enjoy a one-stop solution for their visit to the country.

It can be mentioned here that Bangladesh Tourism Board is also developing a mobile app called Beautiful Bangladesh for both IOS and Android. This will not only allow tourists to receive information on tourism destinations and hospitality but also to book various services related to their visit.

Trainings, workshops

Training all concerned in the tourism industry via workshops held countrywide is another key initiative of BTB, said its Director at the webinar.

So far, they have held workshops in 49 districts, each participated by at least a hundred. Some were for the government officials to encourage them to include tourism while they make their development plans for each district, some for tourist police and archeology department officials to better facilitate tourists, some for media representatives to better equip them in promoting tourism destinations in their news coverage, some for communities to be more tourist friendly, and some for commerce councilors, passport officers, and labor councilors who go abroad to allow them to further promote Bangladesh globally.

He further mentioned, BTB is in efforts to bring transport service providers, accommodation providers, amusement park representatives and restaurateurs in every district under their trainings as well to build a proper tourism infrastructure. In the last three years, BTB mentioned to have provided trainings to 3,235 people of different sectors of the country to make tourism more inclusive.

Rural, community tourism

BTB has also formed a plan to develop rural tourism in 60 districts of Bangladesh. The aim is to make villages better equipped for tourism and make tourism rural centric. Already works on 27 districts are complete, said the BTB Director. For this plan, BTB is involving other ministries and local administration as well.

For community-based tourism, BTB mentioned they have already trained 110 people in different communities across the country. The remote areas of the country which have tourism potentials, but no hotels, resorts or motels, will be developed for community tourism.

BTB is bringing local people of those areas into tourism so that tourists can avail the rural tourism services from them, and be a part of those community practices, enjoying their diverse and unique lifestyles and culture as well as the destination attractions each area has to offer. In turn, those communities will be able make a living out of tourism too.

Basic facilities at tourist places

Many tourist sites across the country lack basic facilities and services like washrooms, seating arrangements, coffee shops, souvenir shops and so on. For these, with the help of department of architecture, BTB has come up with a design to implement the said facilities and services at tourist sites.

The implementation phase will begin next year, said the Director, claiming they will establish these facilities in 51 tourist sites across the country with the help of respective district administrations. The entire project cost is set at BDT 47 crore 88 lac, notified the Director.

Covid related works

For works related to tackling the coronavirus pandemic, BTB informed they are working on a recovery plan for the tourism industry in post covid era. The ministry has already approved it, said the BTB director and has asked BTB to make necessary guideline.

BTB said they have made 11 guidelines themselves while the rest 22 guidelines will be prepared by the organisation of academics from tourism and hospitality management departments of various government and private universities in the country.

Stimulus package for tourism workers

Due to the pandemic and lockdown enforced, millions of workers countrywide involved in tourism businesses are losing or leaving their jobs. BTB CEO Javed Ahmed urged the tourism workers are in dire need of stimulus. Otherwise, these workers will leave the sector and seek employment elsewhere. This will lead to a great crisis of skilled and experienced manpower in tourism. Thus the NTO is

working towards the implementation of such stimulus for the tourism workers of the country.

Tie up with int'l organisations

For further development of tourism in the country, BTB is partnering up with various international organisations as well such as UNWTO and OIC.

From OIC, BTB asked for four tourism development projects. So did 57 countries in the world. But only seven countries received approval from OIC and Bangladesh is one of them, said BTB Director.

Moreover, with the help of UN Volunteer, BTB is training volunteers for sustainable tourism in different areas of the country. BTB has already trained 600 volunteers for this project. Next year BTB claimed to receive 500 more. These volunteers will work for the development of tourism in the country and make people of each region tourism centric and tourism friendly.

E-visa facility

BTB is also working towards the launch of e-visas for our neighbouring countries. The director said it is a need of time and it will help bring more visitors to our country if we can ease the travel process for them. For this initiative, BTB is working with the home ministry and the department of security of Bangladesh to facilitate visitors of neighbouring countries with e-visas. They are also in constant communication with ambassadors of the countries in South East Asia to help maintain the required connection between the tourism boards, tour operators, and stakeholders of our country to their neighbouring counterparts.

Iconic landmark

Like the Eifel Tower in Paris, and the Statue of Liberty in the USA, Bangladesh Tourism Board also seeks to have an iconic landmark of our own in the country. For this, the board has formed a committee and is reviewing several proposals for the landmark. Once done, they will send a final proposal to the government to establish our very first iconic landmark in the country.

Int'l standard training institute

At the webinar, BTB has expressed its new dream - to establish an international standard training institute for tourism and hospitality management. The Prime Minister has already approved the proposal, said BTB Director Abu Tahir Zaber. Thus, BTB has asked for a 2 acre 87 shatangsho land in the capital from the land department to build a campus for the institute. Until the campus is ready, BTB will carry on the training activities at Hotel InterContinental, said the Director. With this institute BTB aims to meet the needs of skilled and professional tourism and hospitality workers all across the country.