

## Destination image and tourism: A case study of Bangladesh

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### Abstract

The role of destination image, during the destination selection process, is of great significance. Most of the destination image researches have been aimed at western destinations; research on low profile destinations like Bangladesh has been limited. This study addressed this gap by attempting an in-depth understanding of Bangladesh image as a tourist destination worldwide, on the basis of primary data collected from European and Asian respondents residing in UK. The research revealed a current situation of very low image of Bangladesh, which appeared distorted and highly negative among most respondents. This report further aid in understanding that destination image is formed through a consistent information circulation between the destination and the tourists' home country. A proper communication of the brand has great impact on the formation of a positive image and the success of a destination.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh tourism, image study, ecotourism, enclave tourism

### 1. Introduction

Each passing year more tourists are attracted to travel various destinations round the globe. The last three decades have seen most development in tourism industry worldwide, mainly due to development of economies, decrease in transportation cost and increasing purchasing power (Pestana, 2011). Tourism is accounted as one of the world's largest industries representing over one third of total global service trade with its wide range of product and services like transportation, hotel, restaurant, tour operator, travel agent, supply of souvenirs and other services for tourists (Endo, 2006). In today's time, due to the effect of globalisation, tourists focus is not fixed on popular destinations of west only, remote and exotic destinations of Asia is also attracting growing number of attention every year. A trend to acknowledge new market in Asia is evident in tourists from source countries like USA, UK, Germany etc. that led to higher interest to understand tourists with greater physical distance. Each market can have different requirement, motivation and expectation from one particular destination. Marketers need to acknowledge these differences and offer product which stands out from other similar product for its unique characteristics; starting with one of the most important aspect of destination marketing i.e. destination image management.

#### *1.1 Tourism and country image issue*

Image of a country has significant effect on decision-making process of tourists and hence is one of the vital areas of tourism studies (Laws, 2002). Since each tourist's motivation to travel and expectation is different from others, studies in this area have been always complicated. The importance of a favourable image for a destination to attract tourists is undoubtedly of highest value as a positive image has more chance to be considered in the destination selection process than a negative image (Beerli, 2004).

Many authors attempted to define image but were criticised for the vagueness of the definition (Etchner and Ritchie, 1993). Jenkins (1999, cited in Pike, 2004) emphasises on the term 'image' that is used in a number of different contexts, i.e. individual's perception about the destination, stereotypes held by groups and images projected by destination marketers etc. Balagu (1997, cited in Laws, 2002) defines perception of a

place by geographers is the apprehension of environmental information by our senses, where as psychologists view perception and image as one because according to psychologists people cannot make any difference between the two. The best definition, which served the purpose of this article, is that of Newman's; which is everything people associate with a brand is a brand image (Newman, 1957, cited in Echtner and Ritchie, 2003).

### *1.2 Tourism of Bangladesh in brief*

Bangladesh is a low profile, small country in South Asia. It has a total surface area of 147,570 square kilometres, sharing borders with India and Myanmar and by the Bay of Bengal to the South. Bangladesh houses a population of 140 million people majority of the population practises Islam. Other than Islam, Bangladesh has a blend of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christian culture in its heritage. Bangladesh climate has very warm summer and moderate winter (Islam, 2009). This country, though very small in area, has a rich collection of tourism product to offer the world. It has a unique cultural heritage with numerous historical and archaeological sites. Bangladesh has the longest natural unbroken sea beach in the world with five world heritage sites (Hossain, 2006, cited in Islam, 2009). Among the five world heritage sites, the most famous are the eighty-one domed Shat Gombuj Mosque in Bagherhat, made by great Muslim saint Khan Jahan Ali in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and world's largest mangrove forest, Sunderbans, which is the home of the world famous Royal Bengal tiger. Tourism sector of Bangladesh is one of the least developed sectors, yet tourists arrival expanded from 113,242 in 1991 to 468,951 tourists in 2008 (Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, 2009); the growth indicates light of further scope by maximising use of existing resources (Islam, 2009).

Bangladesh, since its birth in 1971 is an isolated, backward, poverty stricken, victim of natural and political turbulences. It has a wealth of natural beauty, cultural heritage shaped with war, faith and people. Changing the world's perception on a place is not easy. As Morgan (2004) states one advantage of brands over commodities is that they are an infinitely sustainable resource as long as their value is maintained through careful marketing. The image of Bangladesh perceived by most people appears distorted and negative. The need of a detailed study to analyse the country's image was the starting point of this research.

## **2. Aim of the research**

Most research on destination image was focused on western markets in order to understand the trend and behaviour (Hsu, 2009). There is a big gap academically in understanding country image issue of a low profile country such as Bangladesh among western and eastern tourists. Hence, the main objective of the research is to analyse the image of Bangladesh from the perspective of European and Asian tourists. This research was an attempt to identify the role of destination image of a low profile country and assess its tourism success from the tourists' point of view.

## **3. Literature review**

### *3.1 Importance of destination image in consumer mind*

Destination image is of high significance because image has direct impact on travel behaviour and influences destination selection process; as the most popular destination are those with positive image in the tourist mind (Bonn et al, 2005). Hall and O'Sullivan (1996, cited in Seddighi, 2001) suggests three elements which allows a destination a long term survival on the demand curve: 1) word-of-mouth reporting of returning tourists, 2) image making of media and 3) policies and interest of destination government. According to Milman and Pizam (1995) destination image consists of three main components; firstly, the

product, for example, the quality of attraction; the attitude of the destination hosts and the environment; secondly the weather or climate and lastly the facilities available in the destination.

Gunn (1988) states that image of a destination, could be vague or clear, can form in consumer mind without actual visitation. An image is seen as a mental picture formed by a set of attributes that defines the destination in its various dimension, influences destination selection process (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Beerli and Martin (2004) further suggests, a destination image can be created from an individuals general knowledge or feelings, external influence from friends and relatives, advertisements and their own past experience. This indicates that the creation of an image in consumer mind depends on the degree of familiarity obtained from all social and cultural sources and most importantly for Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs), the ability to understand consumer expectation and offer tourism product accordingly.

There have been numerous studies in the past, which suggests that destination image influences tourist's behaviour (Hunt, 1975, cited in Brent Ritchie, 2003). To understand the formation of destination image better, Gunn's model of seven phases of travel experience are discussed below (Gunn, 1988, cited in Brent Ritchie, 2003). The first stage is the accumulation of mental images about a destination obtained by secondary sources like school, peers etc. is termed as 'organic image' by Gunn (1988). In the second stage, a modification of the previous mental image takes place by further information obtained through more commercialised sources like travel magazines, brochures, travel agencies, advertisements etc and are called 'induced image'. In the third stage, decision to visit the destination takes place, fourth stage is the actual visitation of the destination, fifth stage, sharing the facilities of the destination; sixth stage, returning home and in the last stage, actual modification of the image based on the vacation experience takes place; this last modified image is regarded by many researcher as more realistic and differentiated (Etchner and Ritchie, 2003). Gartner (1993) shares similar view and developed eight phases of image change agent, briefly discussed below:

The first two phases, overt induced-1 and overt induced-2 are formed through information obtained from conventional advertisements in the mass media and information delivered by institutions related with the destination like tour operators. The next two phases are covert induced 1, promotional activities using celebrities; and covert induced 2, they are promotional activities using articles and reports on a destination. Autonomous is the fifth stage, which includes mass media, broadcasting news, documentaries, films etc. about the place. Solicited and unsolicited organic are the sixth and seventh phase that involves information about the destination obtained from people like friends and relatives and lastly organic, is the actual visitation (Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

The above discussion of destination image and its formation will aid in evaluating the importance of image in marketing the brand. Pike (2004) suggested, brand identity is the image of a destination and brand image is how consumer have perceived the brand identity and brand positioning is to enhance resemblance between brand identity and image. Destination Marketing Organisations need to consider all three components with equal importance to sustain tourists' confidence on the product. It is imperative to create trust in the brand by identifying and promoting existing attributes of the product. Trust will be established when consumer will actually find the benefit they were promised prior to their visit to the destination. This research studied Bangladesh as a brand, careful consideration was given to analyse the brand image; how the country is being perceived by the world, with brief discussion on brand identity and the brand positioning strategy adopted by the Bangladesh Destination Marketing Organisations till date. The following section will elaborate understanding of tourism development in Bangladesh with particular consideration of its tourism product attributes and country image.

### *3.2 Development of tourism in Bangladesh and its destination image*

Bangladesh, prior to 1971, was known as East Pakistan. There was limited tourism governance before the independence war in 1971 for East Pakistan (Bangladesh), as the tourism department for the whole of Pakistan had an office in West Pakistan only, with little tourism initiative for East Pakistan. After the independence war in 1971, Bangladesh reorganised the tourism sector by combining both tourism sector and private corporations in to one organisation, known as National Tourism Organisation, under the responsibility of Bangladesh government, with main objectives to develop and promote tourism in Bangladesh (Hossain, 2006, cited in Islam, 2009). National Tourism Organisation in 1973 was renamed as Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation and was assigned greater responsibilities like development of tourism infrastructures along with promotion of Bangladesh as a tourists' destination. This is a semi autonomous government agency reporting to the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism in Bangladesh. Success of Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation was limited due to the political and social instability all along. This resulted in an underdeveloped tourism sector in spite of huge potential to support the nation with its natural and archaeological sites (Shamsuddoha, 2008). Bangladesh's image worldwide is seen more as a nation with poverty, corruption, and victim of natural calamities than a tourist destination (Islam, 2009). Hall and Page (2000, cited in Tuhin, 2011) states that, the major problems of tourism in Bangladesh are over population, natural disaster, unemployment and underdeveloped economic structure. In reality the image of Bangladesh is not as devastating as it is perceived internationally. Irrespective of all the challenges related to geography, climate, history, population and national economy, the country shows a number of positive development indications like increased rate of literacy rate, infrastructure and urban developments, growth of annual GDP rate etc. (The World Bank, 2010).

## **4. Research Method**

The main data collection method of this study was primary research supported by secondary research by making use of existing online sources. Secondary research consisted use of academic journals and reports from Bangladesh government organisations. Primary research was conducted to capture better understanding of the current perception of destination image of Bangladesh. A purposive sampling method was undertaken for this study as the aim of the research was to generate understanding rather than to generalize findings to a larger population (Saunders, 2000 cited in Chang, 2010). Sample selection was done as per convenience and judgement of the researcher. One hundred and ten survey questionnaires were distributed in various places of Sheffield, United Kingdom; seventy-two fully completed questionnaires were later used for analysis purpose. The survey questionnaire consisted both qualitative and quantitative questions. Martin (2008) asserts use of combined methodology in research increases the quality, accuracy, validity and reliability of data. Self-administered street questionnaire was given to respondents from 12 countries (UK, Germany, Romania, Italy, America, Turkey, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Thailand and Sri Lanka), majority of the respondents were British.

## **5. Limitations**

Validity and reliability of the current primary research are of question as it does not represent sufficient sample size and data gathered were from British citizens mainly. There was no research available online that studied the image of Bangladesh as its main focus. Moreover, very little was found regarding tourism in Bangladesh for academic use. This research also lacks inputs from supply side, as access was not granted due to lack of any previous acquaintance with the tourism organisations of interest.

## **6. Analysis**

### *6.1 Components of destination image by Etchner & Ritchie (1993)*

An attempt to analyse the country image of Bangladesh was done in light of the researchers own findings, using the conceptual framework introduced by Etchner and Ritchie (1993) to study destination image in details. The components are namely attribute- holistic, functional-psychological and common-unique characteristics of destination image.

Attribute- holistic: Attribute is the pieces of information people processes and stores in their mind about any tourism product. This could be climate, accommodation, friendliness of the people of the host country etc. On the other hand holistic is the mental picture of the place.

Functional- psychological: Functional continuum are those characteristics of a country that are observable and measurable (physical characteristics- low price, poor roads etc); where as psychological continuums are less tangible and are difficult to measure (atmosphere or mood of the destination).

Common- unique: Common characteristics are those that are shared by most destinations. 'Unique' is the features that distinguishes a destination from other similar choices. This can be man made or natural attractions like Taj Mahal in India, Spanish cultural activities, Eiffel Tower in Paris and Great Barrier Reef in Australia etc. A figure identifying all the image components of Bangladesh, from the primary research, is available in figure-1.

The open-ended questions were used to analyse the three components of image study. The first question, 'What images or characteristics comes to mind when you think of Bangladesh as a vacation destination?', this recorded functional characteristics of Bangladesh as hot climate, extreme poverty, wild life, beaches, culture and low price; with a mental picture of physical characteristics like colourful and interesting wildlife and culture. The next open ended question, 'How would you describe the atmosphere or mood that you would expect to experience while visiting Bangladesh?'; was answered by the respondents as an overcrowded and busy place with some friendly people with inadequate communication skills; which suggests quality of product and service is expected to be of poor standard by the respondents.

The third question, 'Please state any distinctive or unique tourist attraction that you can think of in Bangladesh?'; was mostly answered as 'none' as most people have limited knowledge about tourism product of Bangladesh. Few unique elements also came out from some responses like Sunderban, the largest mangrove forests, Royal Bengal tigers, Shat Gambuj Mosque and Bangladeshi culture and food. It is evident from the study that unique characteristics like the above could be classified as entirely unique to Bangladesh, not attributes like beaches, hills, warm climate, low price, poverty, flood ravaged cities and villages etc., these are certainly not unique to Bangladesh.

The questionnaire included 18 Likert scale questions to mainly asses' standard of hygiene, safety, accessibility of hotels and restaurant and other tourism information, weather, nightlife, price and friendliness of people. This section summarizes the key findings: Majority of the respondents thought local standards of cleanliness and hygiene are not good along with poor standard of living in general. 56% respondents were not sure of availability of good quality restaurants and hotels. 40% thought Bangladesh is a safe place to visit where as 36% were undecided and 24% thought it is unsafe for tourists. However, most people thought local people are friendly and a holiday in Bangladesh will be a real adventure. 84% thought Bangladesh might have many things different and fascinating yet more than 50% were not sure of tourism product of Bangladesh. In terms of atmosphere, 33% thought Bangladesh is restful and relaxing with 43% unsure. Most respondents agreed that Bangladesh offers a lot in terms of natural scenic beauty with pleasant weather; majority of the respondents disagreeing with the idea of availability of good nightlife in Bangladesh. Since more than 70% of the respondents were British, they thought Bangladesh life style and food is not similar to their own. Most respondents deemed Bangladeshi product and services inexpensive; majority of the respondents were not sure of communication skill of Bangladeshi locals, availability of good tourist information and packaged vacation in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has functional attributes such as very warm weather, low price, colourful culture, sea beach etc and psychological attributes of over crowded, poverty stricken, happy and relaxed local life. This study suggests that Bangladesh's uniqueness lies in its culture, food, Mangrove forests, Royal Bengal tiger, which are functional imagery with some negative psychological imagery like discomfort due to excessive warm climate, poverty, lack of appropriate tourism benefits of required standard. Tuhin (2011) advocates, Bangladesh tourism have greater potential to differentiate its product for its uniqueness. Etchner and Ritchie (1993) assert the importance of holistic and unique images in tourists' mind, as the chances of being selected is reduced if they lack distinctive quality in their product benefit. It is needful to communicate appropriate holistic imagery, both functional and psychological, in the mass media like Internet, TV, tourism reports etc.

The image of Bangladesh appeared negative, fragmented and sometimes distorted. The following section discusses promotional effort by Bangladesh Tourist Board, in the last few decades, to underpin few areas that require immediate attention. Organic image as discussed in the literature review is the mental picture influenced by interaction of secondary sources like schools, friends etc., is considerably negative and distorted in the case of Bangladesh. During primary data collection process, many European respondents expressed that they knew very little about Bangladesh. The country appeared in news and sometimes as a topic in their secondary geography assignment for its position in the world map as the biggest delta; which is a victim of severe natural calamities (negative image formation). The second step in image formation according to Gunn (1988) is the induced image, which aids in modification of the organic image through marketing activities like brochures, travel magazines, advertisements etc. The efforts to modify the 'organic image' of Bangladesh through various forms of promotional activities were very limited. A better picture to analyse the induced image of Bangladesh could be obtained through the use of eight phases of Gartner's model of image change agents discussed earlier in literature review. Bangladesh has a logo (sea and sun) with a slogan, 'beautiful Bangladesh', (covert induced-1, traditional advertising and overt induced -1, advertising in television and press ads). These promotional activities have a clear focus on archaeological sites, wild life, sea beaches, hills and culture of Bangladesh. The reach of these insignificant promotional activities is alarmingly limited worldwide. Bangladesh gets maximum exposure when hit hard by natural calamities or political turbulence (Autonomous- news on mass media) all that further affect Bangladesh's image negatively. There is some private and public partnership to promote tourism of Bangladesh (overt induced 2 – information received from tour operators) through some brochures; very little effort was seen to appear as an unbiased travel magazine article worldwide (covert induced-2). Solicited and unsolicited organic are the information obtained from friends, relatives etc. Few respondents who had actual visitation experience of Bangladesh would not recommend a visit of Bangladesh for tourism purpose, as they thought it would not be a satisfying experience due to political instability, excessive crowd, poor standard of available services (hygiene and quality).

## **7. Recommendation**

To address issues like poverty, underdeveloped economy, excessive population etc. and their subsequent impact on tourism growth in Bangladesh, the following approaches are suggested that could aid in improvement of the condition.

Develop enclave tourism in Bangladesh: Geographically isolating and developing closed-off resorts with all tourism facilities and services required by tourists. Enclave tourism proved successful for Maldives, who share similar economic, social and environmental crisis like Bangladesh. Bangladesh could initiate developing all-inclusive resort in Coz's Bazar coastal area and near Sunderban, the mangrove forest, for selective, high spending up-market tourists. Flights to such resorts should remain with Bangladesh Biman only, the national airline, partly to protect the national carrier and also to control mass tourism through charter flights. This approach was also successful with tourism in Mauritius. Mauritius benefited from

enclave tourism and carefully developed their country image as an up-market sun, sea and sand tourism product along with a firm control on the high standard of their product and services.

Promote coastal, cultural tourism and wild life safari: Hilly and coastal areas of Coz's Bazar could be undertaken for development of hill-walking, hiking, mountain biking, water based sport like para riding etc. Local rural festivals and other cultural activities can charm tourists interested in unique Bangladeshi culture along with visiting tea gardens, temples, tribal community of Bangladeshi coastal area. A limited wildlife safari to outside the Royal Bengal tiger protection reservoir zone could be initiated to attract tourists interested in wild animals in their natural habitats. Alam et al. (2009) considers Bangladesh with numerous potential spots ideal for eco-tourism. Eco-tourism; which in itself believes in maximising benefit for the local communities, balances economic growth, protects environment and social justice; need to be initiated in Bangladesh.

New brand identity and positioning strategy: The information recorded from the open-ended questions suggests issues, which require addressing in subsequent destination marketing plans, like reconstruction of positioning strategy to create a clear, positive and realistic image. On the basis of the research, it appeared that Bangladesh is just another 'sun and sea' product with negative imagery associated with it. The study implies need to shift focus from 'sun and sea' brand identity to 'wildlife and cultural' brand identity or some other unique features. Wild life and culture is unique attributes to Bangladesh; and hence could bring better success than the current product. Many respondents thought that Bangladesh offers similar product benefit like India, due to its geographical nearness to India, which in reality is different and much more underdeveloped than Indian tourism product. A clear brand identity needs to be projected to retain tourists' confidence in future. The scale items provided more general information on the attributes-based components of destination image. The issues identified by the attribute-based items imply need for further product development. Perceptions of poor quality of standard and safety, accommodation, information sources etc raises concern that must be addressed in the planning and development of destination tourism areas.

## 8. Conclusion

This research is only groundwork for forthcoming studies in the realm of tourism development in Bangladesh, with a starting point to repair negative country image for each new initiative. The above recommendation was based on the current condition of under utilised tourism sector of Bangladesh and its contribution in the economic growth; its unexplored potentiality and negative image worldwide. Any tourism initiative requires detailed consideration of issues like public-private agreement, interest of the locals, carrying capacity and environmental impacts. Discussions on each of the above important issues were beyond the scope of this research. Academically, there is a big gap that needs to be filled with more detailed research related to Bangladesh tourism in future.

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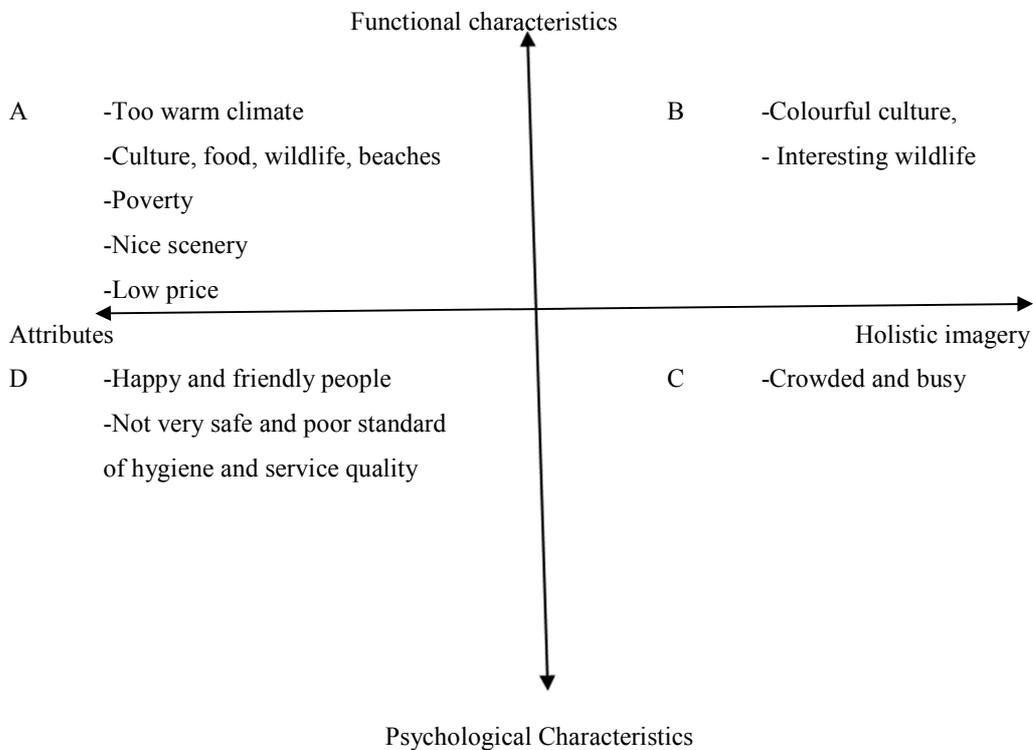


Figure: 1 The components of destination image for Bangladesh by Isan Zahra after Echtner and Ritchie (1993)

Each sector includes for example:

A: Climate, culture, nightlife etc.

B: Mental picture of physical characteristics like mountain, seaside, villages

C: General feeling or atmosphere etc.

D: Friendliness of local people, safety, quality standard etc.

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