

## The Scope for Religious Tourism: An Overview of Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** Bangladesh is the country of four main religions: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. She could be considered as religious tourism destination as it is filled with many religious attractions and holy places. Bangladesh has many religious and historical sites to pilgrims of different religions. For many centuries it is religious or pilgrim's destination and tourist of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists as well as Christians from all over the world can come to visit the areas. Tourist of various religions can visit these pilgrimage places with belief. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the scope of religious tourism as members of different religions live here with peace and harmony. This paper includes that Bangladesh is unique with its culture, history, beauty, archaeology, heritage, religious places, and geographic location. The significance of religious tourism has been discussed from different perspectives. Some suggestions have been given in order to encourage religious tourist to visit different religious places and events of the country.)

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Religious Tourism, Religions, Tourism, and Religious Places

### Introduction

Bangladesh is very beautiful country with a lot of natural resources. She has many things to be proud of. The natural beauty, cultural and heritage sites, archaeological sites, religious sites, hospitality of people etc. are the main attraction of tourists. So tourism is a promising sector in Bangladesh with lot of potentials. There are many religious sites of four main religious beliefs in our country like Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christian. Bangladesh is a country of least tourist arrival and earning sectors from tourism (Pennington and Thomsen, 2010). Tourism could be the profitable sector in Bangladesh (Elena *et al.*, 2012). Religious tourism could be a source to earn foreign currency in Bangladesh. It is kind of tourism where tourist or people individually or in a groups travel to pilgrimage places. Basically religious tourists visit the holy places around the globe

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(Roy and Roy, 2015). Religious customs and Christian beliefs have been increased in the last few years in the country as secularization is found (Hamilton, 2003).

**An Overview of Bangladesh:** Bangladesh is an agricultural country with six seasons. These seasons have own distinctive features and beauties. Geographically, it is located between India and Myanmar along with the Bay of Bengal in the southern part of this region. Earlier Bangladesh was not an independent country. First it got its' independence from Britain in the year 1947. Then it was known as Pakistan. Pakistan then had two parts East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. Bangladesh got its victory on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1971. And Bangladesh also achieved its sovereign independence under the leadership of Bangabondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman after a bloody war against the Pakistani army started on the 26<sup>th</sup> March. Bangla is the official and mother language along with some tribal languages too. It has seven divisions. Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh. Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity are the main religion, in Bangladesh. But there are also some people of different beliefs. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people in our country.

**The Concept and Nature of Religious Tourism:** Religious tourism is a part of cultural tourism visiting to monasteries. It is related to protect the historical religious places too. The definition of religious tourism requires establishing relationship between communication and meaning of it. It is very complex human activities because pilgrimage is also related to religious tourism. At the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference in Girona, Spain, 2015, a religious event was discussed during the presentation session on religious theme. The question was how these events differed from or complemented to religious tourism? At the same time either these are discussed as event perspective (Laing and Frost 2016). But there is a clear classification between the features of pilgrimage and religious tourism in some cases. Religious tourism is a part of pilgrimage tourism. It cannot be separated from pilgrimage. The shrines, faithful on pilgrimage areas are identified as religious tourism destination. The relationship between tourism and religion is related in deep insights. Religion is related to human migration and travel to many historical religious sites. People travel to the sacred places to meet the need for religious purposes and spiritual beliefs. The most popular types of religious tourism are (Vukonic 1990, 100): pilgrimage, group or individual travel to religious sites, mass gathering for religious occasions or functions. The religious places are now regarded as heritage sites. In religious tourism, curious tourists are motivated by their spirit of faith and belief (Liutikas, 2014). The common people also visit not only for religious importance of faith or spirit but also for educational or recreational purposes (Hughes et al., 2013). They travel for fulfilling their desire, values, and enriching identical values (Liutikas, 2014). It is believed that Buddhists, Catholics, Hindus, and Muslims have pilgrimage places. The followers of different religions pay visit these places situated throughout the world. Religious tourism

is also involved with social and group tourism. Religious tourism has become important, as it is known as visits to holy places with a group of people of common faiths. Family tours in this regard are seen more than friends (Morinis, 1984). Religious tourism has a special meaning in institutional form like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Per year more than twenty million pilgrims visit to 150 holy places (Bhardwaj 1973). According to WTO about 300 million pilgrim tourists are involved annually in religious tourism. In different key religious sites, annually six hundred million international and national religious tours are conducted. For that reason, the Asia and Pacific part is blessed with both religious sites and for the central point or hub of religious nature, religious cultural activities, and pilgrim centers. (Source: [http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/nrt\\_proposal\\_flyer-14july2016-lowres.pdf](http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/nrt_proposal_flyer-14july2016-lowres.pdf), 2016). This arrival encourages religious pilgrimages (Tourism Highlights 2014).

**Literature Review:** Rot (2014) provides some description about religious tourism and pilgrimage with common characteristics of religious tourism in Croatia. Various tourist attractive sites and tourism demand are highlighted here. It presents the role of religion in the life of pilgrims. Pilgrimage is related to spiritual to secularism and tourists to pilgrimage traveler (Vijayanand 2012, 329). Several discussions have been made and still going on to define a person who makes travel for pilgrimage or religious purposes. Still there is a debate on either the person should be regarded as a tourist or pilgrim (Tsomokou and Velaoras, 2009; Raj and Morpeth, 2007; Rubia and De Esteban, 2008). The history proves that pilgrimage routes represented path of trade to socialize and to meet with people of new countries and culture.

Khondker and Ahsan (2015) highlight different types of tourism in a paper including religious tourism, cultural tourism, archeological tourism etc. They define religious tourism in a very simple way along with different religious places in Bangladesh of four religions like Muslim, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Puşcaşu (2015) describes the clarification of religious and pilgrimage tourism in the literature review. He has gone through the economic, social and geographical points to clarify pilgrimage and religious tourism. Das and Chakraborty (2012) in their study tried to focus on the tourist attraction sites in different parts of the county. Natural, cultural, religious, and archeological sites are available here. Religious tourism could be a very potential resource in Bangladesh as she has many religious tourist spots. Proper planning and marketing can attract more tourists to visit Bangladesh, and the country could be benefited economically. According to VIDIC (2007) many rare and invaluable cultural items with distinct architectural design of mid century are kept and preserved in religious libraries. This kind of tourism represents the rise in monasteries, multicultural mission, civilization and unique culture. Family, individuals and tour operators have made contributions of developing religious tourism.

According to World Tourism Organization (WTO, 1985) cultural tourism is related to the movement of people to travel for study; travel to events and festivals; to visit monuments; to see nature, the art, the pilgrimages; and to visit folklore. So, pilgrimage is inseparable part of cultural tourism. Religion is observed as a significant part of culture. Pretillo and Lo Presti (2009) also have agreed about this as religious tourism is involved with cultural tourism. They defined that many people not only travel to various holy sites for religious purposes but also to consume as a heritage and cultural product when marketed.

The use of Internet for spreading on religious ideology started in 1980s. During this time online religious group started using Internet as a communication tool to express religious interest and religious activities through online communication (Campbell, 2006). Arasa (2008) emphasized that promotional activities need to be improved and considerations need to be given in planning, implementing, running, and promoting a website.

**Objectives:** The objectives of the study are outlined below:

- To assess the potentials of religious tourism development in Bangladesh;
- To describe different religious tourism resources in Bangladesh; and
- To provide some suggestions in order to promote religious tourism development in Bangladesh.

**Methodology:** The present study is a qualitative one. It is also an exploratory type of study. As there is no earlier study found so far by the authors on the present topic in Bangladesh, no precise hypothesis could be made. Theoretical discussions were made on the potentials of religious tourism development, target market, and religious tourism resources in Bangladesh. The study basically utilized secondary data. For this, desk research was conducted on the relevant journal articles, books, newspaper articles, thesis papers, website articles and publications of Bangladesh Tourism Board (BTB), Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) and World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). Theoretical analysis based on secondary information and available religious resources in Bangladesh along with researchers' intuition, introspection and judgment was made throughout the paper.

### **Findings and Analysis of Findings**

**1. Potentials of Religious Tourism in Bangladesh:** Religious tourism could be regarded as faith tourism as people travel individually or in groups for leisure, pilgrimage or fellowship purposes. Nowadays, modern tourists visit many holy cities around the world. In case of Bangladesh, it has huge potentials of religious tourism. Bangladesh is basically

a Muslim majority country and for this reason we have many mosques and shrines like Star Mosques, Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Saat Gumbaz Mosque, ChhotaSona Mosque, Mosque of Baba Adam, the Shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal, the Shrine of Sultana Bayazid Bostami, Shrine of Shah Amant etc. where the followers pay visit to get spiritual purity. Dhakeshwari National Temple, Bhabanipur, Chandranath Temple, KalBhairab Temple, The Puthia Temple, Kantajee Temple (Dinajpur), Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission, Dhakeshwari National Temple, and Kantajew Temple are assumed as the important holy places of worship for Hindu devotees. Sompura Bihar in Paharpur was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in our country. It is believed that Lord Buddha visited Bangladesh and stayed here for few days, as such Golden Temple, Ramu Buddha Bihar, Dharmarajika Buddha Bihar can also attract a huge number of Buddhist tourists in Bangladesh. Thousands of Christian devotees also visit Holy Rosary Church and Armenian Church. Henceforth, the various events and festivals of Bangladesh like Eid-ul Fitr, Eid-ul Azha, Durga Puja, Pahela Boishakh, Rash Mela, Buddha Purnima, Christmas day, can be offered to the tourists which are the representation of our religious culture. Though all the types of festivals and events are based on different religious values, believes, traditions, customs and rituals, travel to these events help create social bondage among people of different cultural background, and also help to enhance mutual understanding and respect.

**2. A. Target market for religious tourism:** The target market for religious tourism in Bangladesh could be both domestic and foreign tourists of different countries. People from different countries of different religion like Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian are the target market for religious tourism in this country. It is realized that Bangladesh is a holy place for Buddhist tourists. Muslim tourists from different countries also come to attend Bishwa Ijtema, and visit many historical mosques and shrines situated in different parts of the country. Every year Bishwa Ijtema is organized after the Holy pilgrimage to Makkah. It attracts a large number of Muslim tourists constituting 3.4 % of the inflow of tourist in Bangladesh. Bangladesh can attract second largest number of Buddhist tourists. Hindu and Christian tourists also visit to Bangladesh to explore this country and to enjoy natural beauty of the country.

Basically, Bangladesh is a potential country for Muslim and Buddhist religious tourism rather than Hindu and Christian. There are many religious sites of these four religions in Bangladesh. The sites include the Bishwa Ijtema place, Mainamati, Paharpur, Shat Gombuj Mosque, Kantaji's Temple, Dharmarajika Buddha Vihara, American Church and so on. Figure 1 shows the target market for religious tourism.

Figure 1: Showing the Target Market for Religious Tourism

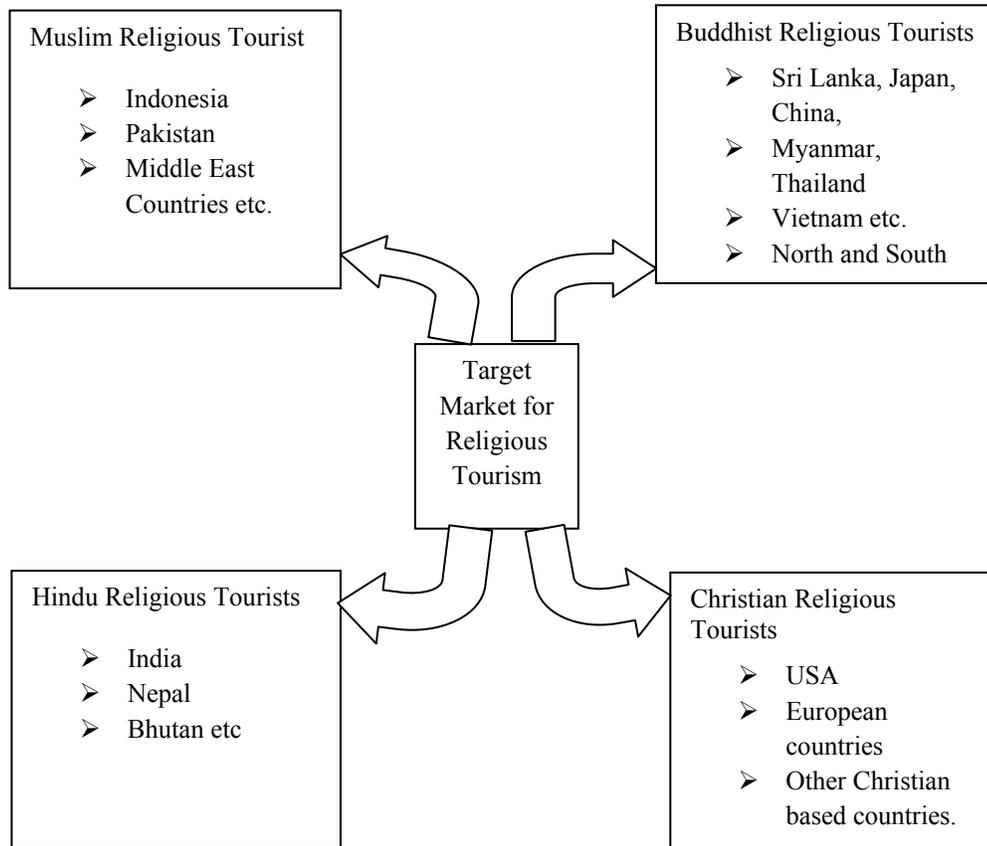


Figure: 1 (Authors own)

**2.B. Impact of religious tourism:** Religious tourism has a great impact on the destination countries. Religious tourism is a part of cultural tourism. It can bring a positive development of the country. Libeson and Muraleedharan (2008) described the impacts of religious tourism and pilgrimage on the rural communities. It creates a mutual respect to other religions. It can also bring social, economic, and cultural benefits for the country. These three factors are related very much with each other. This tourism helps contribute in the country's economic development. Society and culture are also preserved if religious tourism could be developed in a proper and planned ways. Figure 2 represents the impacts of religious tourism

Figure 2: Representing the Impacts of Religious Tourism

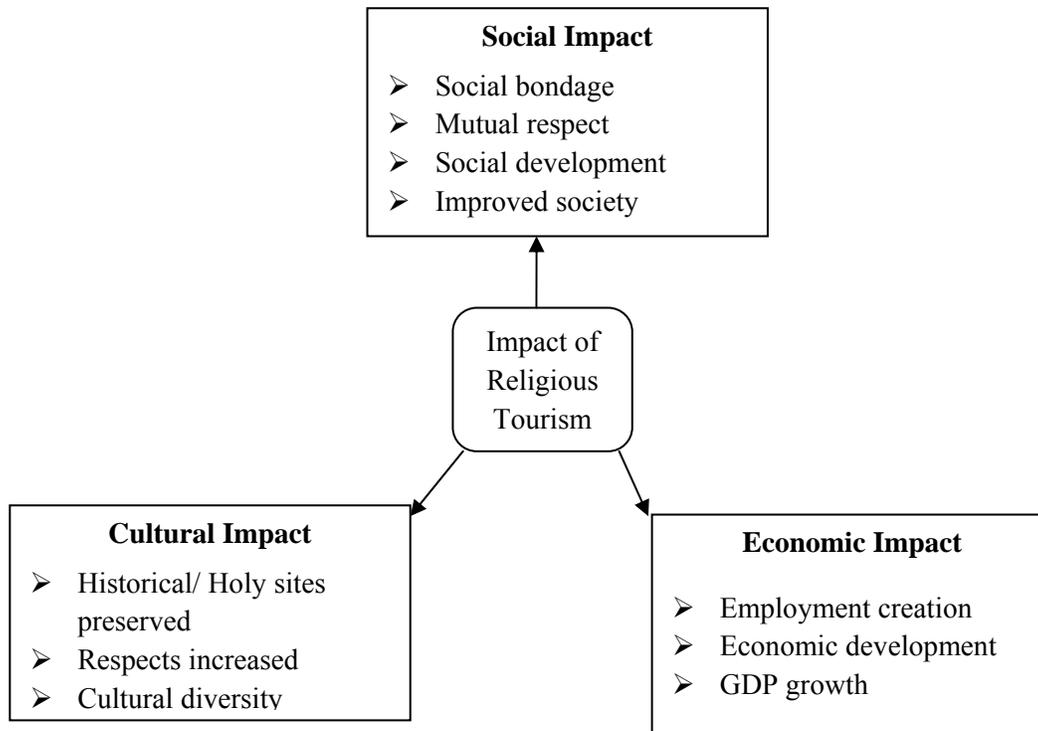


Figure: 2 (Developed by authors)

**2.B.i. Economic impact:** Goeldner and Ritchie (2006) mentioned that tourism industry plays an important role in economic growth of destination countries worldwide. It creates employment opportunities, generates income, increases taxes and revenues, and ensures foreign exchange earnings. This happens when tourist visits various destinations and spends money and increases the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Religious tourism or pilgrimage tourism and the economy of destination countries are closely related. It provides a leaf to tourists' inflow and contributes to the economy (Yalghouzaghaj and Shorbolagh, 2013). It also mobilizes resources of the destination countries. Thus, it ensures the development of economy of a country thorough religious tourism development. For the regional development, job opportunities, and cultural values pilgrim tourism could be very helpful. It generates revenues more than any other kinds of tourism do (Karar, 2010). Besides the mosques, tombs, shrines, and other religious sites are established near schools, bazars, and colleges for the religious tourist. People are interested to pay visit these religious places. It generates job opportunities as well as income (Papoli Yazdi and Saqai, 2006). During the visit of tourist in Bangladesh at different religious places, tourists spend money for buying a token of memories. Internal

tourism market of religious tourism can play an important role for developing the economy of the country. From the above statements and discussions, the economic benefits of religious tourism are very clear. The local community will be benefited economically with the development of religious tourism. At the same time it has impacts on society, culture, politics, and environment (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b; 2010c) the small community and economy are involved in terms of religion (Vukonic, 1998).

**2.B.ii. Social impacts:** Pilgrimage or religious tourism can also bring a dramatic social impact in a country. Some social problems or challenges could be solved if Bangladesh could adopt strategic planning for religious tourism promotion. Mutual understanding and respects could be obtained through religious tourism. This kind of pilgrimage tourism creates a social bondage among the countries crossing borders through cooperation. Religious tourism has an impact on social values, social aspects, beliefs, customs, and traditions (Pourtaheri, Rahmani, and Ahmadi, 2012). It is a tool for social development along with economy. It has become a safeguard for preserving rural resources, developing local economy, enhancing social harmony, and improving rural life styles (Garrod, Wornell and Youell, 2006). It provides economic growth, diversification, and job opportunities in the society through creating markets for rural products. Social and cultural development in the rustic arenas through improving and maintaining public service and opportunities for social contacts. Natural and built environment need to be protected in the society for tourism (Sharpley, 2002). In evaluating the social impacts of festivals, the societies and events are considered deeply (Richards, de Brito and Wilks, 2013). These include different social events (Frost and Laing, 2013), local community event (Jepson and Clarke, 2015), traditional customs and rituals (Laing and Frost, 2015). The social impacts and legacy of urbanization is important too (Smith, 2012; 2016).

**2.B.iii. Cultural impacts:** Pilgrimage is a significant characteristic of the main religions in the world. It is the cultural and religious parts of the society. It also creates mobility of people through trade, cultural exchange, political bondage, and many other dimensions (Barber, 1993: 1). Pilgrimage and tourism is different based on the journey of directions. The central point of the “pilgrim” and the “pilgrim tourist” is social-cultural center. The main destination is the pilgrimage center. It provides a combination of tourism and pilgrimage journey to renowned pilgrimage centers (Cohen, 1992). According to Smith (1992) pilgrim and tourist are regarded as religious traveler and vacationer. It is defined culturally based on travelers’ motives. Some authors developed theoretical, political, cultural, economic, and geographical concepts (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Religious features are seen as both spiritual and educational angles, and also in recreational and cultural motives (Hughes et al., 2013). Pilgrimage tourism is changing the traditional ways and crossing religious practices beyond it. Cultural and social impacts are engaged in these events (Liutikas, 2014). Nunn (2012) defines culture as rules of thumb in decision-making process. In tourism tourists will be guided by cultural norms. Religion is

observed among the elements of cultural items. Culture is very powerful to determine the international tourism inflows in the globe. Tourists share their cultural identity during the visits in the destination regions (Fourie and Santana Gallego, 2013).

### **3. Resources of Religious Tourism in Bangladesh**

**3.A. Buddhist holy sites:** Dharmarajika Buddha Vihara, Mahasthangarh, Paharpur Mahavihara, Jagaddhala Vihara, Halud Vihara, Vasu Vihara, Sampura Vihara, Mainamoti, Salban Vihara, Sitakat Vihara, Ananda Vihara, Bhoj Vihara, Golden temple etc are the historical sites for the Buddhist tourists. These sites are also regarded as holy places for them. UNESCO declares some of these sites as World Heritage Sites. Bangladesh is the birthplace of Buddhist scholar Atish Dipankar. Bangladesh has the largest Buddhist Vihara 'Paharpur Mahavihara' in this region. UNESCO has declared it as a world heritage site. The living heritage of Lord Buddha as still popular in Bangladesh as it was in the past (Nyaupane and Budruk, 2009). After independence the government has carried out many excavations. In this way many Buddhist archaeological sites have been discovered in Bangladesh. But still some remained undiscovered. These historical or holy places could be rare resources for Buddhist pilgrim tourists from home and abroad. In Buddhism visiting places where Lord Buddha born, got enlightened, and died is regarded as holy tasks. There are about 500 million Buddhists in the world. Every year pilgrimage tourists are increasing. Over 350,000 foreign tourists visit the places where Lord Buddha lived, meditated, and delivered sermons for mankind (Alwis, 2007). The tourists from Japan, India, Myanmar, Tibet, china, Thailand, and many practicing tourists might come to Bangladesh to visit these sacred sites.

**3.B. Muslim/ Islamic holy sites:** Bangladesh is a beautiful place for Islamic tourism. Bishwa Ijtema is the most important religious event for Muslims. Every year thousands of Muslims come to Bangladesh to attend this religious event. Besides, Bangladesh has a lot of mosques all over the country where they can travel to see. There are numerous renowned mosques around the country with Mughal architecture. These could attract religious tourists from the overseas having Muslim faith or beliefs in Islam. Some of the important mosques and shrines in Bangladesh includes Star Mosques (Mughal style), Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Shait-Gumbad Mosque, Bagerhat Saat Gumbaz Mosque, Chhota Sona Mosque (Monument of Sultanate Period), Mosque of Baba Adam (at Rampal near Dhaka), the Shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal (Sylhet), the Shrine of Sultana Bayazid Bostami (Nasirabad), Shrine of Shah Amant Ashan Manzil, Sonargaon, and Lalbagh Fort (in 17<sup>th</sup> century, Mughal architecture). These are very famous religious treasures of the country. Every year Muslim tourists visit these places. According to GTA Muslims and Resources (n.d.), Bangladesh is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest Muslim majority nation. It is about 90 % of the total population. Many religious events are arranged in Bangladesh like Bishwa Ijtema to attract Muslim tourist. Other religious people also come to this country

for religious purposes too. Only 8,983 tourists visited Bangladesh in 2009 for religious purpose (Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation).

**3.C. Hindu holy sites:** Hinduism is the second largest religion in Bangladesh. There are many religious places of Hindus in the country where the tourists can visit for prayer and carry on religious rituals. Various kinds of religious festivals are arranged devoting to goddess in the religious occasions. Rash mela is such a kind of religious event that can attract tourists easily. In Bangladesh there are also many temples around the country where the Hindu and tourists can go to attend religious activities as well as see the places. Some of the religious sites include Dhakeshwari National Temple (Dhaka), Adinath Temple (Moheshkhali Island near Cox's Bazar), Bhabanipur temple (Bogra), Chandranath Temple (Sitakunda), KalBhairab Temple (Medda), The Puthia Temple (Rajshahi), Kantajee Temple (Dinajpur), Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission (Dhaka city) and Gurudwara Nanak Shahi (Dhaka city, beside University of Dhaka). Among them Dhakeshwari National Temple, Adinath Temple, and Kantajee Temple are very famous as tourist spots in Bangladesh. Every year a lot tourist visits these places. Besides, believers of Hindu religion also come to see the festivals, to learn the culture, and observe the belief.

**3.D. Christian churches:** This is the place of four major religions. Christians have been living for years in Bangladesh with their own belief or faith. In Bangladesh, some ethnic minorities are found with Christian belief. They have their own culture, festivals, lifestyles that are unique from others. Their prayer places are known as church. There are some churches like ST. Mary's Cathedral (Dhaka), Armenian Church etc. All the religious leaders visit these churches for delivering religious speeches. So tourist from various Christian worlds can visit this country and visit these places along with enjoying the natural beauty and historical and archeological sites. Bangladesh could be an ideal place for religious tourist of various faiths to explore and gather experience. It is the positional place for religious tourists too.

#### **4. Suggestions for the development of religious tourism in Bangladesh**

For the development of religious tourism some initiatives are needed. State, private sectors, and community involvement is necessary to ensure religious or pilgrimage tourism development in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a secular country described in our constitution. For this reasons, the followings are some suggestions for the development of religious tourism.

- The concept of secularism should be ensured at every level of the state
- The safety and security should be ensured for the pilgrim tourist at everywhere such as air port, lodging areas, and destinations.
- The religious products need to be standardized and improved to add their values.

- Effective marketing policies and strategies should be adopted at the destination areas in order to increase religious or pilgrimage tourist inflow in the country. The advertising campaigns and public relations need to be adopted for promoting these destinations.
- The guidelines should be made to ensure sustainability for developing religious tourism in the country.
- The seasonality and other problems need to be overcome by adopting some strategic policies.
- The respect for all religious sites should be increased among the community people.
- The administration should be careful for ensuring comfort of the religious tourist.
- The religious sites should be preserved for attracting more religious tourists in the regions.
- The religious tourism should be linked with cultural tourism or other forms of tourism.
- The good relationship should be ensured with the target market countries.
- The local people should be involved in religious tourism development activities.
- The local religious tourists need to be encouraged to travel for religious purposes.
- The level of religious knowledge should be enhanced among the potential pilgrim tourist.
- To attract local and foreign tourists many shops, hotels, restaurants, gas stations and transportation facilities need to be established near the schools, hatta, bazaar, and roadsides but in a proper way.

### **Conclusion**

Bangladesh is a developing country in the world map. She has a lot of potentiality of developing religious tourism. Particularly people of four major religions are found living in this beautiful region. Many religious events, spiritual sites, and heritage sites are there in Bangladesh. UNESCO declares some of them as World Heritage Sites. The target markets for religious tourism in Bangladesh are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian countries. Many people of China, Japan, Korea, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri-Lanka, Thailand, and Middle East countries are potential consumer for the religious products. Tourists from these countries may come to visit this country in religious or spiritual faith. The social, economic, and cultural impacts of religious tourism are immense. Religious

tourism in Bangladesh could be a tool for poverty reduction in many regions through employment creations. Society and culture could be preserved through religious tourism development too. It will increase the harmony among the nations along with mutual respects to other religions. For developing religious or pilgrimage tourism proper planning, integrated marketing approach, promotional tools, public-private community partnership, awareness building, safety and security are prerequisite.

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