Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism geographies of Bangladesh: study on Sylhet region

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Abstract This qualitative study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism geographies of Sylhet region in Bangladesh developing analytical linkages between pandemic and tourism geography. On the basis of in-depth interviews, the study explores micro effects on diverse actors involved in the tourism process of Sylhet division. As one of the emerging tourism hubs, why Sylhet region demands special treatment from local, national and international authorities and policymakers to mitigate the adverse effects of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, has been investigated in this paper. However, the central argument of the study is that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the demand and supply chains, local businesses, transportations, hotels and restaurants, tea industry, corporations, and local professional lives due to the imposed restrictions on human mobility, causing a sharp decline in socio-economic activities of Sylhet’s tourism geographies.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · Tourism geography · Recreational geography · Bangladesh · Sylhet

Introduction and background

In this age of globalization, tourism geography plays a significant role in enhancing development activities, economic growth and creating the global image for a nation. It is also one of the expanding areas which links different geo-cultures, spatial histories, and civilizational ties creating bridges among nations. Today, tourism geography has been considered as a vital instrument to create employment, alleviate poverty, as well as to protect and improve natural and cultural resources (Blake et al., 2008). And, it accounts for 10.4% of global GDP, creates 10% of global employment, and generates 6.8% of total exports (Menegaki, 2020; WTTC, 2019).

In tourism geography, natural resources provide basic elements and factors for producing tourist products; the natural and man-made setting for the tourists’ recreation, life and relaxation. Indeed, tourism geography tends to be highly sensitive to environmental and ecocritical issues such as natural catastrophes, epidemics, war, socio-ethnic conflicts, economic disasters and terrorist acts (Hung et al., 2007). As a result, these kinds of events influence tourism geography and tourists’ behaviour to a great extent which would have long-term impact on the tourism industry. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the growing expansion of tourism geographies around the world, experiencing one of the hardest hits that affects both supply and demand side of this industry (Aaltola, 2020).
2022; Islam & Fatema, 2020; Nhamo et al., 2020). According to the World Travel and Tourism Council’s (WTTC) research report, more than 75 million workers lost their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “Research reveals a potential Travel Tourism GDP loss in 2020 of up to US$ 2.1 trillion causing a solid decline in international tourist arrivals by 60–80%. WTTC also estimates the daily loss of a shocking one million jobs in the travel tourism sector for the widespread impact of the coronavirus pandemic (Škare et al., 2021)” (Fig. 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic has a devastating impact on naturally diversified, multi-cultural, and rich historical and civilizational tourism geographies of South Asia affecting nearly 47.7 million travel and tourism jobs, both formal and informal. Following this pandemic, a decline of over US$50 billion in GDP has been forecasted in the tourism industry alone in this region (The World Bank Group, 2020). Even the tourism geographies of Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have been affected heterogeneously following this sector’s contribution to national GDP (as per Fig. 2) though the adverse effect of this pandemic on both formal and informal actors and stakeholders of this emerging tourism region including Bangladesh cannot be neglected (Fig. 3).

However, in recent days, tourism geographies have been playing a tremendous role in the development and socio-economic growth of Bangladesh. Bangladesh has unique tourism geographies in the world because it has ancient archaeological sites, medieval monasteries, cultural and religious places, the world’s largest sea beach at the south-eastern part, the world’s largest mangrove forest—the Sundarbans at the south-western part, and naturally diversified Sylhet region attracting both national and international tourists (Sayeda et al., 2020). The economic size of the tourism geographies of Bangladesh constitutes approximately BDT 500 million, with total revenue of USD$1157 billion from 2009 up to 2019. On average, 550,000 tourists visit Bangladesh, which provides almost 2.23 million both formal and informal job opportunities (Chowdhury, 2020).

Bangladesh’s tourism industry, especially Sylhet region works as a source of national economic growth, regional development and job markets for the local people as a whole. Situated in the attractive Surma and Kushiarra Valleys in the midst of attractive tea gardens and dense tropical forests, tourism geographies of Sylhet are major destinations for all tourists visiting Bangladesh. “Lying between the Khasia and the Jaintia hills on the north, and the Tripura hills on the south, Sylhet breaks the monotony of the flatness
of this land by a multitude of terraced tea gardens, rolling countryside and the exotic flora and fauna (Hossain et al., 2013).” Sylhet is growing as promising tourism geography due to its diversified tourists’ spots, easy communication facilities, luxurious hotel and resort accommodations, and standard consumer services provided by both public and private authorities. Sylhet region, comprising four districts, is attractive for the tourists because the geography works as an epicentre of environmental, recreational, cultural and religious tourism. Both national and foreign tourists choose Sylhet to navigate as tourism geography for its natural and historical diversities along with comparatively easy and feasible road, rail, water, airways, and spot-to-spot communications (Hossain, 2020).

But the tourism geographies of Bangladesh including Sylhet region have been facing a huge crisis in terms of economic activities, human mobility, losing jobs and so on for the adverse effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry has been affected severely in Bangladesh. A significant reduction in tourism activities and revenues has been recorded in the country. The tourism sector is a vital contributor to the GDP and employment generation in Bangladesh. The tourism sector has been facing a huge crisis in terms of economic activities, human mobility, losing jobs and so on for the adverse effect of the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank Group, 2020).
pandemic. The World Bank Group (2020) predicts a loss of roughly US$2.03 billion to GDP causing massive risks for 420,000 formal jobs and 50 million jobs in informal sectors across Bangladesh due to this ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The financial loss of the aviation industry will be more than BDT 6 billion, hotels and restaurants will lose about BDT 15 billion, travel agents will lose BDT 30 billion—causing an overall estimated loss of BDT 97.5 billion for the tourism geographies of Bangladesh including Sylhet region (Hasan, 2020). However, this study explores the micro effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on diverse actors of Sylhet’s tourism geographies developing analytical linkages between recreational geography and pandemic. On the basis of in-depth interviews and informal conversation, this paper assesses how the macro effect of this coronavirus pandemic has been influencing the micropolitical lives and livelihoods of marginal people, the environment of business and recreation, and the local labour market, (in) directly involved with tourism geographies of Sylhet division. And, this study argues that the coronavirus pandemic has been seriously affected local businesses, marginal professions, local industries and entrepreneurs, and complex webs of economic activities centring on tourism geographies of Sylhet due to the restrictions on human mobility and interactions.

Literature review

The global history of pandemics shows severe socio-economic and biopolitical impact on tourism geographies around the world. Cholera outbreaks (1961-present) impacted awfully domestic and global geographies of tourism where both demand and supply chains of recreational services became vulnerable (Kirigia et al., 2009). SARS (2002–2003), a short-term coronavirus pandemic, affected adversely Chinese tourism because air travel allowed the virus to spread to 37 countries (Hall et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2005). The foot and mouth disease reduced tourism expenditures in the United Kingdom that cause huge losses for the stakeholders of this sector (Blake et al., 2003). McAleer et al. (2010) explained that the impact of SARS is higher compared to Avian Flu in terms of tourist arrivals in East Asian tourism geographies. Swine flu or 2009 influenza caused a loss of $2.8 billion to the Mexican tourism industry. MERS-CoV (2012-present) triggered a loss of almost $2.6 billion for the Korean tourism geographies (Hall et al., 2020). Research analyzed the impact of Malaria, Yellow Fever, Dengue, and Ebola on global tourism geographies revealing an extensive decline in tourist arrivals (Rosselló et al., 2017). Malaria risk in a country caused 47% decline in tourist arrivals. ZIKA outbreak (2015-present) seriously affected the Latin American tourism geographies halting major sporting events with a loss of about $3.5 billion (Hall et al., 2020).

But the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on global tourism geographies is higher than any other previous pandemic or global disaster. Karabulut et al. (2020) accessed the adverse effect of pandemics on tourism geographies, developing pandemics index, analyzing international evidences of pandemics including the current COVID-19 pandemic. This study reveals that pandemics reduce tourist arrivals and have negative impact on the socio-economic development of low-income countries. On the basis of text mining techniques (webpages, docs, social media, among others), Uğur and Akbiyik’s (2020) study demonstrated that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, countries experience sharp decline in tourism revenues and national GDP. This pandemic very badly affected both supply and demand sides of tourism geographies, as a result of multilayered restrictions on mobility and travel. Authors presumed volatile tourism regimes for the emerging tourism geographies around the world in the post-COVID days.

Hall et al. (2020) contextualized the current state of this coronavirus pandemic, discussing the experiences and impact of previous global pandemics scientifically. This study, drawing on available literature, assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry, government, consumer behaviour, recreational patterns, among others. After explaining the systemic dimensions of tourism in coronavirus affected recreational geographies, the study sketches recovery trajectories to cope with multifaceted pandemic crises. Gössling et al. (2021) conducted a rapid assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global tourism geographies, leading to an unprecedented global change in recreational order. Strict prohibitions on public gathering, interpersonal interactions and mobility, and keeping social distance might change the norms and values of tourism geographies around the world, causing sharp
decline and uncertainties for tourism economies and entrepreneurs. According to Vărzaru et al. (2021), the global outbreak of COVID-19 has significantly affected the tourism industry in terms of economic turnover, socio-cultural exchanges, human-nature contacts and national image, facilitated by the forces of globalization. This study rethinks that adequate synthesizing measures, decisions, policies and collaborations would ensure resilient tourism geographies amid this pandemic. Lew et al. (2021), in their edited volume, argued that a ‘new normal’ would be experienced by the global tourism order in the post-coronavirus pandemic world, where a set of newly developed norms and values would positively transform the supply and demand chains of tourism sector. Proper and shared endeavours to mitigate the adverse impact of COVID-19 following socio-economic equality and justice would help to regain the major principles of sustainable tourism.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has huge impact on the tourism geographies of South Asia including Bangladesh. Chowdhury’s (2020) study reveals devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic on tourism geographies of Bangladesh. The corporates, companies, entrepreneurs, and stock market mechanisms centring on the tourism industry have heavily been affected due to country-wide lockdown and restrictions on human mobility. Considering the prospects of several tourism geographies of Bangladesh i.e., Chattogram, Sylhet, among others, as both domestic and international tourists’ destinations, this study suggests probable scientific and effective policies to cope with the adverse effect of this pandemic (Hassan & Burns, 2014). Deb and Nafi (2020) identified that both inbound and outbound tourism have been affected severely due to restrictions on mobility, cancellation of flights, and shutting down hotels, resorts and restaurants. Tourism businesses experience massive economic losses, leading to employment losses for most of the formal and informal tourism workers. A policy nexus between public and private sectors would be feasible to ensure the reopening of the tourism industry in Bangladesh. Bagchi’s (2021) study examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism geographies of Bangladesh from both economic and environmental point of view. This study shows a sharp decline in the national GDP and contribution of the tourism industry after the outbreak of COVID-19. Despite the loss of tourism employment, tourists’ arrival, hotel and recreational business, the coronavirus pandemic positively facilitates the quality of the natural environment of Bangladesh’s tourism geographies. The study suggests some possible recovery strategies for sustainable tourism industry considering both positive and negative aspects of COVID-19. Amin et al. (2021) critically analyzed the adverse effect of coronavirus pandemic and suggested reviving strategies, following Computable General Equilibrium Model (CGE), recommending government stimulus packages, coping strategies and institutional integrity to mitigate the loss of tourism industries of Bangladesh due to this pandemic.

However, tourism geographies of Sylhet region in Bangladesh have faced huge macro and micro crises in terms of economic losses, closing of small, medium and large businesses, losing employment and regional GDP, among others, due to the adverse effect of the coronavirus pandemic. Several studies (Haque & Islam, 2015; Hossain, 2020; Hossain et al., 2013; Roy et al., 2016) discuss the prospects, challenges, policies, strategies, mechanisms, public–private dynamics, and tourists’ satisfactions and expectations centring on the development of the tourism geographies (natural, cultural, religious, recreational and eco-tourism) of Sylhet region. But no study has found till now which addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sylhet’s tourism geographies. Considering such lack of contextual knowledge, this study tries to bridge the research gap, developing logical relationships between pandemic and tourism geography, locating contextual relevance for Sylhet region.

Theoretical background: linkages between pandemic and tourism geography

This study explains the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector of Sylhet region in Bangladesh developing analytical linkages between pandemic and tourism geography. A pandemic is a global outbreak of disease or an epidemic that spreads spatially due to human mobility, contacts, and other interactive activities. It occurs over a very wide area transcending international boundaries while affecting a huge population (Porta, 2014). Morens et al. (2009) have outlined several components of pandemic including “wide geographic extension, disease
movement, novelty, severity, high attack rates and explosiveness, minimal population immunity, infectiousness and contagiousness.” Apart from health crises, pandemic has also an imminent effect on the global geo-economic order including the spatially multidimensional geography of tourism (Hall et al., 2020).

Tourism geography focuses mainly on the spatiality of places as recreational and travel geographies using the lenses of human geography (Hall & Page, 2005). From the perspective of human geography, tourism geographies are “not only merely bounded spaces or locations but also settings (or locales) in which social relations and identities are constituted developing a sense of place (Williams, 2009).” Moreover, tourism is geographical due to its multifaceted dimensions like— “human–environment interactions and landscapes; conservation and management of places and environments; spatial behaviour and human mobility (Williams & Lew, 2015).” Following intertwined waves of globalization, tourism geography integrates recreational, cultural, social, educational, health, business, religious and travel geographies linking a complex web of spatial networks. In tourism geography, physical geography—air, rail, road and waterways, recreational places—connects other human geographies providing positive leverage to the development and socio-economic growth of a state. A positive image of physical and human geographies along with service availability and quality robustly determines the impact of certain recreational geography on local as well as global tourism industries. In a nutshell, human mobility from one place to another, interactions among diverse actors, security environments, services and facilities play a key role in shaping the magnitude of tourism of place(s).

On the other hand, pandemic, civil war, socio-political instability and other types of insecurity have negative effects on tourism geography. These directly hamper local and national GDP growth, business environment, trade openness, employment rate, spatial development and conservation, sustainable resource politics, stable transportation facilities, and the global image of a state. Among these insecurities, pandemic bears the highest level of negative impact and multifaceted threats for the geographies of tourism around the world (Mostafanezhad et al., 2020). Several studies (Browne et al., 2016; Demir et al., 2019; Gössling et al., 2021; Hon, 2013) reveal that travel is central to epidemiology and disease surveillance causing both the rapid spread of pandemics and a halt of tourism.

The latest epidemic, SARS-CoV-2, has halted the wheels of global tourism due to nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPI) such as travel ban, restrictions on mobility, social distancing, curbs on crowding, quarantine requirements and border control (Fong et al., 2020; Ryu et al., 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has affected both “the demand side–restrictions on freedom of movement, border closings, guests’ fear of infection—and the supply side–closure of accommodation and catering establishments as well as leisure facilities used for tourism (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020).” The World Travel & Tourism Council anticipated that global tourism geographies suffered a loss of almost $4.5 trillion in 2020 contributing 49.1% GDP decline compared to 2019. “In 2020, 62 million jobs were lost, representing a drop of 18.5%, leaving just 272 million employed across the sector globally, compared to 334 million in 2019. Domestic visitor spending decreased by 45%, while international visitor spending declined by an unprecedented 69.4% (WTTC, 2021).” In order to assess the impact of pandemic on tourism geography, recently, Yang et al. (2020) developed a dynamic stochastic general equilibrium (DSGE) model which shows that due to COVID-19, tourism demand declines following the rising health risk (Karabulut et al., 2020).

However, the tourism geographies of Bangladesh faced a severe downfall of tourist arrival due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The UNWTO (2020a, 2020b) has forecasted a loss of about $470 million for the tourism sector of Bangladesh during this coronavirus pandemic. Sylhet region, one of the emerging tourism hubs of Bangladesh, has been facing a solid decline in the tourism business. The Sylhet Chamber of Commerce has predicted a loss of about $10 billion in tourism geographies of Sylhet division due to the restrictions on mobility, interactions, and direct contacts to avoid the spread of COVID-19.1

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1 Interview with the president of the Sylhet Chamber of Commerce, Sylhet, April 20, 2021.
Methodology

An exploratory approach has been taken to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on diverse actors and sectors involved in the tourism geographies of Sylhet region in Bangladesh. Ontologically, this study seeks answers to ‘how the adverse reality is fixing the fact’ (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) in the research area. It aims to assess the possible impact on the lives and livelihoods of local human resources as well as on the functioning of diverse public and private sectors, caused by this coronavirus pandemic. However, this qualitative study has been conducted collecting data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data have been collected through in-depth interviews using snowball sampling and unstructured questionnaires with the engaged people (tourists’ spot authority, hotel/resort authority, transportation workers, social and business leaders, government officials, and (in)formal business people concerned with tourist activities) in tourism geographies of Sylhet region (four districts i.e., Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj) (see Fig. 3). Observation during the pandemic is also one of the sources of primary data.

Here, three basic approaches—informal conversational interview, general interview guide and standardized open-ended interview—of qualitative interviews, proposed by Patton (2001), have been chosen to assess the impact of the pandemic on the people who are living hand to mouth and exploring businesses centring on tourism geographies of Sylhet region. The informal conversational interview has been used as a tool to know their experiences during the pandemic and how it plays a role in generating adverse effects on the people dependant on tourism geographies of this region in Bangladesh. After developing a basic checklist of questions, a standard-ized open-ended interview questionnaire has been used in interviewing the selected respondents, allowing them to express their experiences comprehensively and independently.

This small-scale study has been conducted through unstructured qualitative interviews with key respondents (13 from tourists’ spots, 4 from hotel or resort, 7 from the transportation sector and 5 from business professionals who are involved in tourism) along with observations and focus group discussions (FGDs). Indeed, narrative analysis is used to analyse the primary data. The opinions and experiences of respondents are reformulated by using narrative analysis.

Sylhet region as an emerging tourism hub in Bangladesh: background and factors

Sylhet is a growing regional tourism hub in South Asia. This region is also playing a key role in the development and economic growth of Bangladesh where tourism geography’s contribution cannot be neglected. Sylhet, an administrative division of Bangladesh, has four districts having huge tourism spots in each of the districts. Sylhet region is unique tourism geography in Bangladesh because it simultaneously provides the tourists’ opportunities to visit natural, cultural, and religious spots. The unique location of the region situated amidst the Surma and Kushira valleys, hilly areas, hoars, and forests provides a growing attraction to national and foreign tourists. Every year the tourism geographies of this region count 20–25 lakhs tourists leaving a huge impact on the overall economic growth and development of Sylhet region (Das, 2021, p. 2).

Tourists find Sylhet district rationale for their tours because it has Bisnakandi, Ratargul Swamp Forest, Jaflong, Lalakhal, Bholaganj, Tabil, Hakaluki estates, Museum of Rajas, the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) and Hazrat Shah Paran (RA), and so on. It has three 5-star hotels i.e., Rose View, Noorjahan Grand, Dusai and a huge number of resorts, motels and hotels following the international and national standards. But the fact is that these residential facilities are available in Sylhet town. As standard and secure living facilities are not available in most of the tourist spots of Sylhet. On the other hand, moving from one spot to another is not much complex because of its developed communication facilities. Different types of micro vehicles like auto-rickshaw (locally dubbed as ‘CNG’), private car, motorcycle, rickshaw, boat, and others are used to reach tourist spots from Sylhet city. Most of the tourism routes lack direct bus service from the urban epicentre of Sylhet.

Moulvibazar district, widely known as the ‘Land of Tea’, seems plentiful having tourism geographies like Madhabkunda Eco Park, Madhabpur Lake, Lawachara National Park, Madhabkunda Water Fall, Hakaluki Haor, Baikka Beel Wetland Sanctuary,
the shrine of Shah Mustafa, and many others. It has five-star hotels like Grand Sultan Tea Resort and Golf, Dusai, and many three-star hotels, resorts, and cottages. Every year about 5 lakhs tourists visit Moulvibazar. Sreemangal’s tea tourism and Kamalganj’s Monipuri loom industry play a key role in shaping the district’s tourism economic turnover (District Administration, Moulvibazar, 2018).

Habiganj has Satchari National Park, Rema Kalenga Reserved Forest, Sankar Pasha Shahi Mosque, Komola Ranir Dighi, Bithangal Akhra, Baniachong village (the biggest village in Asia) and so on including five-star hotels like the Palace Luxury Resort and many resorts, hotels, motels, and cottages. Almost 2 lakhs people visit different tourist spots of Habiganj. Due to plentiful natural resources, rich hydrocarbons, the growing industrial hub of Sylhet region, and the tea industry, Habiganj is emerging as one of the major hotspots of business tourism in Bangladesh. Easy communications from Dhaka and Chittagong, door to Sylhet region, and spatial connections with multiple geo-cultural regions of Bangladesh make Habiganj a priority for both national and international tourists in navigating this tourism geography. Micro vehicles (CNG, motorcycle, private car etc.) and buses are used to reach most of the spots in Habiganj. Most of the tourism spots lack accommodation facilities. Habiganj Sadar and other Upazila Sadars provide accommodation opportunities to travelers. Considering the expanding opportunities and outreach of Habiganj’s tourism geographies, the district branding has been set as—‘Hills, hillocks, marshlands and woods are interwoven with the tourism of Habiganj’.²

In Sunamganj, Tanguar Haor, Hason Raja Museum, Pailgaon Zamindar Bari, Pagla Masjid, House of Baul Musician Shah Abdul Karim, Limestone Lake of Tekerghat, Shimul Garden, Barikka Tila, Niladri Lake and many other places attract tourists to prioritize the district in their tour list.³ Sunamganj’s tourism engine survives using a complex web of unique haor tourism, cultural tourism and natural resources. Every year about 5 lakhs people visit these tourist spots. And most of the tourists visit Tahirpur Upazila. Because maximum spots are situated here and the Indian state Meghalaya’s beautiful sites are also visible from these tourist places. For communications, CNG, motorcycle, engine-operated boat, speedboat, rickshaw, and easy bikes are used to move from one spot to another. But the matter of concern is that communication and accommodation facilities are not satisfactory in terms of national and international standards in Sunamganj. Even several governmental and nongovernmental initiatives are developing the tourism webs of Sunamganj though lack of required infrastructural facilities, multifaceted entrepreneurship, security environment, and tourists’ satisfaction analysis are lagging behind the tourism geographies of Sunamganj (Rahman, 2021).

These diversified tourism geographies of Sylhet region make a complex web of business, investment, communication, entrepreneurship, employment, corporatism, marketing and research. Sylhet’s tourism geographies provide huge scope to the local workforce, investors, businessmen, transportation people, public and corporate authorities from national to international level. Rapid and available communication facilities i.e., road, rail, air and waterways are the major cornerstones of the regional tourism geographies of Sylhet. But lack of proper marketing policy, branding, infrastructural deficit, decay of ecotourism, and developmental activities causing environmental degradation in tourism geographies of Sylhet are the major obstacles in flourishing a sustainable tourism and recreational industry here (Haque & Islam, 2015; Hossain et al., 2013). Since the last two decades, the economic geography of Sylhet is changing rapidly where tourism geography is a promising sector having an ever-emerging economic growth and development.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism geographies of Sylhet region: an analysis

The tourism geographies of Bangladesh have experienced a severe downfall in tourists’ arrival due to the countrywide lockdown and other restrictions on human mobility. Sylhet division’s all the four districts have counted huge loss, halting the wheels of socioeconomic and biopolitical livelihoods and prosperity.

² Habiganj District. Bangladesh National Portal. Retrieved May 19, 2022, from http://www.habiganj.gov.bd/bn/site/view/district_branding.
³ Sunamganj District, Bangladesh National Portal. Retrieved April 26, 2021, from http://www.sunamganj.gov.bd/site/view/tourist_spot.
Both demand and supply sides, micro and macro actors, and the complex web of recreational geographies of Sylhet region have impacted negatively to a large extent (Bangladesh Tourism Board, 2020). However, this study finds that the tourism geographies of Sylhet have been affected due to a decline in the number of tourists and visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic. These tourist places were completely shut down for five months e.g., March 2020 to July 2020. After that the government declared to open these tourist places with the condition of maintaining health and safety as well as keeping physical distance, wearing masks and washing/sanitizing the hands in certain intervals. The local administration set a range of maximum visitors to visit any tourist spot. This limited operation of the tourism places merely helped to sustain the industry. This study finds that no visitors from abroad visited these places during the COVID-19 pandemic (till December 2020). There is no government initiative to assess the loss of the tourism sector in the Sylhet region (as well as Bangladesh) due to the pandemic. The operators and entrepreneurs of the tourist places urged the government to compensate them to recover their loss due to lockdown to come across the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the loss of Sylhet’s tourism geographies has been estimated more than BDT 10 billion due to the adverse of this coronavirus pandemic. The country-wide lockdown also made it quite impossible to run the activities of tourism sectors, as human mobility had been prohibited, which is regarded as the heart of tourism geographies, in Bangladesh including Sylhet region. The findings of this study demonstrate that the four districts of Sylhet region—Sylhet, Habiganj, Moulvibazar, and Sunamganj—provide more than 40 lakhs employment opportunities, both formal and informal, to the local people mostly. Due to the adverse effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the employees became jobless or were forced to change their traditional employment to lead their everyday lives.

Almost all of the tourist spots were empty during this pandemic, causing a great loss in the regional GDP and the pace of economic growth as a whole. The role that plays the tourism geographies in national development has been halted due to country-wide lockdown and shutdown, and formal restrictions on human movement and mobility. The tourists’ spot authorities, where both formal and informal employees work for earning their livelihoods, were not able provide the daily and monthly wages of their staff.

It has been informed that most of the informal workers of the tourists’ spots i.e., Bholaganj Sada Pathor, Satcharri National Park, Tilagarh National Eco-Park, Khadimnagar National Eco-Park, and others did not get their wages, as the spots were shut down, following the formal restrictions on the day-to-day activities without basic needs. Kabir, one of the informal workers of the Satcharri National Park, informed that—

This coronavirus pandemic has made our daily lives very difficult, sometimes, I consider myself good for nothing. I was almost solvent before this pandemic. I earned from both the park authority and tourists. Now, no one visits here to see my sorrows. Even the authority, where I am serving for the last few years, did not wish for taking any news of myself and my family. This pandemic teaches me that I have to find a secured job. Unless I would not be able to serve my family and educate my children. For the last few days, I was wondering why, even, the government had not yet taken any initiatives for ourselves. I am serving this nation since my adulthood with no demand, except my just wages. So, it is high time, when the nation should take care of myself. But what I get, nothing, not even any good wishes. [Vai (brother)],

most of the hotel authorities of Sylhet region had been faced huge losses due to the total shutdown of their business. Some of them informed that, due to almost no government initiatives to recover the losses of tourism geographies in Bangladesh, they became loan defaulters, and might be going to leave this business, which has been galloping their capital, or, making their capital a lazy bear, a situation caused by this COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the restaurants saw a sharp decline in their business. Due to the lack of both national and international tourists, their earnings

4 Kabir (pseudonym), the Satcharri National Park, Habiganj, February 2, 2021.
had been reduced to 70–80%, causing great difficulties for their survival and providing daily wages to their labourers. Almost 70–95% of restaurants, based on tourist spots, were shut down, generating no income for the owners and labourers as a whole. Most of them were compelled to change their profession to earn their basic survival needs, to fight against this coronavirus pandemic. Muhib, one of the restaurant owners at Bichanakandi, Sylhet stated that—

I was a solvent man before this pandemic. I had a small restaurant ‘Pankauri’ (pseudonym), floating on the river. Since the eruption of COVID-19 pandemic, I have lost my only earning source. Now, I am a street vendor. I sell vegetables. My daily earning rate has been reduced by almost 75%. The whole family, consisting of seven members, is dependent on my income. I have two school-going children. I do not know anything about their future, whether I would be able to continue their education or not. I am in a great disaster. Everything is going out of my hand. I was a man who provided jobs to four/five people daily. Now I am struggling to earn my livelihoods. Such a virus, which is neither visible nor too much powerful against we people, who strongly believe in the Almighty Allah. It might be a political trick to punish the poor like me…. ha ha (laughing)……

Moreover, the findings of this study demonstrate that economically marginal people have been affected adversely, as they have limited options to recover their losses. Several boatmen at the Ratargul Swamp Forest, Sylhet, informed that they failed to conduct their bare lives due to the adverse effect of this coronavirus pandemic. Raju, one of the boatmen at Ratargul, informed that almost 500 people daily work here to provide service to the tourists, who visit here. Each of them earns approximately BDT 800–1500 per day. But this pandemic makes them jobless. Because, most of them live in marginal and remote geographies, where the availability of jobs and diversified working sectors are not available. Bilal, another boatman from Ratargul, told that—

I had three boats before the starting of this coronavirus pandemic. I, along with my three brothers, operated journeys at Ratargul for the tourists, who visited here. We earned a smart amount of money from this business. Due to country-wide lockdown, no tourists came here to visit Ratargul, and, this made us jobless. For that, we had to stay a few days with almost no food to consume. Finally, I sold my three boats and a piece of land, then, bought a motorcycle. Now, I am a bike-rider, who earns too little but has to feed a lot of people. Nature might be playing with me. I do not know what would be my destiny in future.

When we were coming back from Ratargul, we asked the CNG-fueled auto-rickshaw driver, Babar, about the effect of coronavirus pandemic on their livelihoods. He replied that—

Due to lockdown and other formal regulations, we, CNG drivers, failed to operate a good number of trips. Besides, lack of passengers also made us disappointed. The government, even, did not take care of us. The rich people of our locality are living smooth lives; on the contrary, we are decaying and dying day by day. Let’s see, what happens next time.

On our journey to the Shimul Garden, Tahirpur, Sunamganj, we met with several cameramen, who captures photos and sends to tourists at the cost of a small amount of money. The number of cameramen would not be less than 30. In our informal conversation, most of them informed that each of them earns BDT 500–1000 daily by capturing beautiful moments of the tourists, who visit here. They told about their joblessness during this pandemic. And, their number was almost 100 before the pandemic. Due to losing this daily job, most of them were compelled to change their work. Some of them went to Dhaka as rickshaw pullers or garment workers or day labourers. We found the webs of connectivity in Tahipur Upazila very poor. There is no formal bus or vehicle service, like other areas of Sylhet region, to provide

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5 Muhib (pseudonym), Bichanakandi, Sylhet, January 27, 2021.
6 Bilal (pseudonym), the Ratargul Swamp Forest, Sylhet, March 5, 2021.
7 Babar (pseudonym), Sylhet Sadar, March 5, 2021.
comfortable and secure journeys for the tourists. Most of the tourists have to depend on micro-vehicles like rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, motorbikes to visit the tourist spots of Tahirpur. So, the pre-existing problems along with this coronavirus pandemic create more difficulties for Tahirpur and other tourist spots of Sumanganj. 

We visited the area of the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA), one of the major spots of religious tourism in Bangladesh, where we found a huge number of hotels, restaurants, business and transportation. For our research purpose, we conducted several interviews with different hotel authorities. Most of them informed their huge loss due to the coronavirus pandemic. Their estimations calculate approximately BDT 200 crore loss from the eruption of the pandemic to March 2021. Moreover, the authority of a residential hotel at Naiorpool area, Sylhet, said that “most of our staff members had been released or given leave. Only a few are there for security and other purposes, he added. the situation is too uncertain this time. We don’t know what is there ahead, he further said (The Financial Express, 2021).”

The Manipuri entrepreneurs, from both Sylhet and Moulvibazar, informed a sharp decline of their Manipuri cloth business during this coronavirus pandemic. They lamented that more than 80% of pre-orders had been cancelled, which made them economically more marginalized. In fact, the ready order had been declined by the businesses, causing a great halt in their working, due to the uneven losing of capital. Most of the Manipuri cloth-manufacturing workers of Moulvibazar had to leave their hereditary traditional work to survive in the face of this COVID-19 pandemic. Surprisingly, socio-cultural instabilities had been increased within the Manipuri societies due to this pandemic, as we informed from our fieldwork.

Conclusion

It appears from the above analyses that the tourism geographies of Sylhet region have been severely affected due to the travel and mobility restrictions and formal regulations to cope with this COVID-19 pandemic. Sylhet region, comprising of four districts–Sylhet, Habiganj, Sumanganj and Moulvibazar, is one of the emerging and growing tourism hubs in Bangladesh as well as South Asia, which contributes a considerable amount in national GDP and economic growth. But this coronavirus pandemic brings a disaster for the actors, who are directly and indirectly involved with the management and functions of Sylhet’s tourism geographies. Most of the tourist spots, hotels, motels, cottages, restaurants, businesses, transportations and others experience a sharp decline in their earnings and profits. In some cases, they had to leave their traditional jobs to survive in this COVID-19 pandemic. The marginal actors i.e., tour guides, cameramen, street vendors, boatmen, hotel and restaurant workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, brokers, and others, experienced huge transitions and losses in their lives. In a nutshell, this pandemic has hampered the development and expansion of the tourism geographies of Sylhet, causing a great danger for the future. Moreover, the formal initiatives are also very little from the demands and need to sustain the tourism geographies of Sylhet. Nevertheless, the diversified and multifaceted tourism geographies of Sylhet would be the assets for Bangladesh, if the structural limitations, development of spot to spot easy and cheap connectivity, developing service-based economy in the tourist spots, constructing standard hotels, motels and restaurants nearby tourism spots, ensuring security, among others, can be ensured through a national-local nexus and commitment and integrated vision for regional and national development to cope against multifaceted effects of COVID-19 pandemic.

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8 Fieldtrip in Tahirpur upazila, Sunamganj, March 17, 2021.
9 Fieldtrip in Kamalganj upazila, Moulvibazar, March 29, 2021.
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