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The benefits and risks of developing tourism in ethnic minority habitats

It is essential to ensure that these successful initiatives are community-led and sustainable and that the benefits are shared equitably among local communities

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Sketch: TBS

Do you know that Bangladesh is home to more than fifty ethnic minority groups, each with its unique cultural heritage and traditions? The Chakma, Marma, Garo and Santal are chief among these communities with distinct cultural identities.

Activities highlighting the cultural heritage, traditions and customs of different ethnic minority communities have enormous potential to attract tourists.

Such tourism strives to promote and conserve the cultural legacy of ethnic minorities, while creating economic opportunities for them.

With increased cultural tourism and the demand for unique and immersive travel experiences, it is time to realise Bangladesh's ethnic minority tourism potential. It can foster economic growth in multiple ways. It can create job opportunities and revenue for ethnic communities. By providing homestays, tour guiding services or selling handicrafts and local products, ethnic minority people can earn revenue.

Furthermore, tourism can help develop infrastructure, such as improving road networks, electricity, water supply and telecommunications, in remote or marginalised areas. This can benefit both the tourists and the local communities and lead to additional economic development, such as expansion of other industries like agriculture or manufacturing.

In addition to delivering direct economic benefits, ethnic minority tourism can help diversify the tourism industry and minimise its reliance on traditional tourist attractions. It can attract a niche market of culturally curious and conscientious travellers interested in authentic experiences by highlighting the distinctive cultural legacy of these people.

Ethnic minority tourism in Bangladesh has the potential to support economic growth and cultural preservation. However, it can also bring out a few concerns.

When ethnic minority communities are not involved in the planning and management of tourism activities, they often get exploited. Without active involvement and cooperation from the local people, such tourism can have detrimental social, economic and environmental effects.

Another issue is cultural appropriation. This can occur when outsiders appropriate or misuse ethnic minority cultural elements for their benefit, destroying traditions and customs, and causing tension and conflict between the ethnic minorities and outsiders.

Furthermore, tourism development can have negative environmental impacts, especially if environmental sustainability is not prioritised. For instance, if tourism activities are not adequately managed, they can result in environmental degradation, such as damage to natural habitats and wildlife, pollution and waste production. These can harm the environment and

ultimately affect the local communities that are dependent on natural resources for livelihoods and survival.

It is essential, therefore, to ensure that the growth of ethnic minority tourism in Bangladesh is ethical and sustainable, with full participation and approval of the local communities. This can be achieved through community-based tourism projects in which ethnic minority groups participate in developing and managing tourism activities and earn a fair share of the economic advantages.

There are various examples of successful tourism initiatives from around the world that Bangladesh can learn from. For instance, the Maori community in New Zealand has successfully promoted its culture through tourism, allowing visitors the chance to learn about Maori customs, partake in traditional activities and taste the local cuisine. This has not only contributed to the preservation of their culture but also produced cash and employment prospects.

The San South African community has developed community-based tourism initiatives that teach visitors about their traditional way of life, including hunting, gathering and use of medicinal herbs. They used tourism to campaign for their land rights and cultural preservation.

Ethnic minority communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts can promote their culture and traditions through ecotourism. The visitors can learn about their distinctive customs, participate in traditional dances, music and purchase locally made handicrafts.

It is essential to ensure that these successful initiatives are community-led and sustainable and that the benefits are shared equitably among local communities. This can be accomplished through partnerships between the government, private sector and local communities and by promoting environmentally and culturally responsible tourism practices.

Authorities, industry leaders and local communities may all play crucial roles in developing and preserving ethnic minority tourism in Bangladesh. Policymakers can support the development of such tourism by creating policies and regulations that promote sustainable and responsible tourism practices. They can also provide funding and technical assistance to ethnic minority communities to help them develop and market their tourism activities.

Tour operators and hotel owners can also promote ethnic minority tourism by incorporating ethnic minority experiences into their offerings. They can collaborate with local communities to develop tourism activities and ensure their operations are environmentally sustainable and culturally sensitive.

By actively participating in the design and management of tourism activities, local communities can ensure that their cultural heritage is preserved and that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed justly. They can also take the lead in promoting their tourism products and services, thereby increasing control over the development of their communities.

Developing and protecting ethnic minority tourism in Bangladesh requires the active engagement and collaboration of all stakeholders, including politicians, industry leaders and local communities. By ensuring such tourism is sustainable, culturally sensitive and economically advantageous, Bangladesh may tap into the immense potential of tourism to advance cultural preservation and economic growth.

Though, ethnic minority tourism in Bangladesh can provide a unique opportunity to promote cultural preservation, economic development and sustainable tourism practices, there are risks associated with it as well. Community-led and culturally sensitive initiatives can mitigate risks such as exploitation and cultural appropriation.

Bangladesh's cultural history and ethnic minorities have much to offer to the rest of the world. By encouraging and safeguarding ethnic minority tourism, we can generate economic opportunities for these people and assure the preservation and celebration of their distinct cultural identities.

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