

ISLAMIC HERITAGE AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CONSERVATION BASED FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGING SACRED AND CULTURAL SITES IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

In Bangladesh, Islamic architecture has evolved through centuries, beginning with the arrival of Arab merchants in the mid-8th century and reaching its zenith during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. This evolution led to a unique architectural blend, characterized by terracotta ornamentation, multi-domed structures, and intricate inscriptions. Despite the loss of some historical monuments, the enduring presence of mosques, madrasas, and shrines continues to shape Bangladesh's cultural landscape. This study aims to seek to propose policy recommendations that balance economic development with historical conservation, religious integrity, and community participation, promoting responsible tourism amid the pressures of globalization and mass tourism.

Key word: Legacy of Islamic history, culture and responsible tourism, stakeholders of heritage tourism

Introduction

Islamic heritage sites stand as both cultural treasures and sacred symbols, reflecting the rich legacy of Islamic civilization. Renowned sites such as Mecca, Medina, the Alhambra, and Hagia Sophia, alongside countless others, attract millions of visitors annually, fostering intercultural dialogue and contributing significantly to economic growth. In the context of Bangladesh, the Islamic architectural journey dates back to the mid-8th century with the arrival of Arab merchants. However, it was the conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiyar Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1204 AD that marked a significant turning point, leading to the establishment of a distinctive Islamic architectural identity. The Sultanate period witnessed a harmonious blend of indigenous Bengali styles with Turkish, Persian, and Arab influences, characterized by multiple domes, intricate terracotta ornamentation, arches, and Arabic-Persian inscriptions. The subsequent Mughal era further enriched Bengal's architectural landscape, introducing symmetrical designs, lavish use of marble and colored tiles, and the incorporation of sprawling gardens-hallmarks of Mughal grandeur. Today, despite the loss of some monuments to time, the legacy of Islamic architecture in Bengal remains vividly preserved in the domes of mosques, minarets of madrasas, and revered shrines scattered across the country. These structures not only reflect architectural brilliance but also embody the deep-rooted cultural and religious history of the region. Therefore, by analyzing global case studies of successful Islamic heritage tourism models, the research will identify best practices adaptable to the Bangladeshi context. It will also explore the role of governments, international institutions, and local investors in implementing responsible tourism policies. Ultimately, this study aspires to create a strategic blueprint for responsible tourism in Bangladesh's Islamic heritage sites, ensuring that economic development coexists harmoniously with cultural conservation and religious respect in an era of globalization and mass tourism.

Methodology

This research maintains and adopts a qualitative method, analyzing class survey, case studies, and Islamic heritage sites visiting. Literature review insights are drawn from successful sites in domestic tourism and adapted to the context of Bangladesh responsible tourism practices.

Major Islamic heritage sites and responsible tourism in Bangladesh: Bangladesh is home to a rich array of Islamic cultural heritage sites that reflect its historical and religious significance, showcasing diverse architectural styles from the Sultanate to Mughal periods. The Sixty Dome Mosque (*Shat Gombuj Masjid*) in Bagerhat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, highlights Turkish and Indo-Islamic architecture. Dhaka's Star Mosque (*Tara Masjid*), renowned for its Mughal-inspired tile work, remains a major tourist attraction, while the terracotta-adorned Bagha Mosque in Rajshahi, built by Sultan Nusrat Shah, requires conservation. The Shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet attracts numerous pilgrims but faces overcrowding and infrastructural strain. Other significant sites include the Choto Sona Mosque in Chapai Nawabganj, once adorned with golden domes; the Kusumba Mosque in Naogaon with its terracotta ornamentation; the Darasbari Mosque in Gaur; the Bibichini Mosque in Barguna; the colorful Chandanpura Taj Mosque in Chittagong; the historic Surs Mosque in Dinajpur; and the Makhdumia Shahddaula Jame Masjid in Sirajganj. Despite their historical importance, many of these monuments face threats like environmental decay, overcrowding, and neglect, highlighting the urgent need for conservation and public awareness.

Muslim Architecture of Bengal: Muslim architecture in Bengal evolved through two key periods: the Sultanate (1204-1576 AD) and the Mughal (1576-1757 AD) eras. The Sultanate period blended indigenous Bengali styles with Islamic elements, resulting in terracotta-adorned mosques and curved cornices. The Mughal era introduced grander designs, featuring symmetrical layouts, marble work, and intricate floral motifs, aligning with broader Mughal aesthetics. Today, Bengal's Islamic structures stand as enduring symbols of its rich architectural heritage within the wider Islamic world.

Challenges and strategies for responsible tourism and heritage conservation: Bangladesh's Islamic heritage sites hold immense cultural and religious significance but face numerous challenges in promoting responsible tourism. Many mosques and shrines are located in remote areas with poor road connectivity, limited visitor facilities, and inadequate accommodations. Additionally, these sites suffer from urban sprawl, pollution, climate damage, and a lack of systematic conservation efforts. Overcrowding at pilgrimage sites, such as the Shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal, leads to mismanagement and resource strain, making it difficult to balance religious practices with tourism management. Infrastructure deficiencies further hinder tourism growth. Bangladesh ranks poorly in tourism infrastructure globally, with traffic congestion, road accidents, and inadequate hotel facilities affecting visitor experiences. In contrast to countries like India that integrate heritage preservation with modern development, Bangladesh continues to replace historical sites with modern structures, as seen with the demolition of the Bind Bibi Mosque. Effective conservation requires updated legislation, stricter enforcement, and policies that balance heritage protection with urban growth.

Socioeconomic and conservation framework

1. **Comprehensive planning:** Implement strategies that balance heritage conservation, economic sustainability, and community involvement.
2. **Legal and environmental protection:** Enforce legal safeguards, prevent urban sprawl, and integrate eco-friendly measures to mitigate climate change impacts on heritage sites.
3. **Infrastructure development:** Improve accessibility, modernize visitor amenities, and promote biodegradable accommodations that respect cultural integrity.
4. **Public-Private partnerships:** Foster collaboration among governments, investors, heritage organizations, and local communities for, digital tourism, and responsible business models.
5. **Community empowerment:** Create jobs, support local entrepreneurship, and introduce heritage education programs to ensure community benefits.
6. **Responsible tourism models:** Promote eco-tourism and Halal tourism to attract responsible travelers.
7. **Monitoring and evaluation:** Establish systems to assess tourism's impact on conservation.
8. **Technology integration:** Use virtual reality, augmented reality, and AI-driven storytelling to engage tourists while reducing physical strain on fragile sites.
9. **Halal tourism expansion:** Develop Shariah-compliant hotels and Muslim-friendly services.
10. **Cross-border collaboration:** Create regional tourism to promote cultural unity and boost tourism.

11. **Cultural research and digital archives:** Strengthen access to Islamic history through academic research, museum curation, and digital documentation.
12. **Policy and investment framework:** Establish policies that regulate visitor influx and prioritize conservation, while leveraging technology and community involvement for responsible growth.

Case studies and conducted survey related with Islamic history, culture and responsible tourism

1. **Alhambra, Spain:** As a UNESCO World Heritage site, Alhambra showcases successful heritage conservation through eco-friendly tourism practices. Strategies include limiting visitor numbers, using renewable energy, and adopting water conservation techniques inspired by its historic irrigation systems, ensuring both preservation and sustainability.
2. **Istanbul, Turkey:** Historic mosques like Süleymaniye and Sultan Ahmed (Blue Mosque) integrate modern sustainability practices, such as energy-efficient lighting and responsible spaces, alongside waste reduction programs. These efforts maintain the religious and historical integrity of these iconic sites while minimizing their environmental impact.
3. **Malaysia:** A pioneer in Halal and responsible tourism, Malaysia merges Islamic cultural experiences with eco-tourism. The Islamic Tourism Centre leads initiatives that promote responsible travel, eco-conscious accommodations, and responsible transportation, making Malaysia a model for environmentally-friendly Islamic tourism.

Key takeaways: These global case studies highlight how Islamic history and culture can thrive alongside responsible tourism. Through strategies that balance environmental preservation, cultural authenticity, and tourism growth, destinations can:

- Protect historical sites for future generations.
- Boost local economies through responsible tourism.
- Promote cultural respect and environmental responsibility.

Survey study: A survey conducted by students of the Islamic History and Culture Department at New Model Degree College, Dhaka, explored public awareness of Islamic history, culture, and tourism. The survey shows those 21 respondents of our college from various academic backgrounds (including Honors, BBA, B.Sc., and M.A.), the majority demonstrated awareness of Islamic heritage and its connection to tourism. Social media, family, and friends were the primary sources of their knowledge. Most participants acknowledged the link between Islamic heritage and tourism, citing prominent sites like Lalbagh Fort, Ahsan Manzil, Shahjalal Mazar, and Sonargaon. The survey highlights the importance of education and community engagement in promoting Islamic heritage tourism in Dhaka.

Proposed framework for balancing economic progress with cultural integrity

A well-structured framework balancing economic progress with cultural integrity requires strategic policy implementation, investment in preservation, and stakeholder engagement. Recommendations for sustainability, economical efficiency, and heritage conservation in Islamic sites include

1. Policy development and governance

- Establish legal frameworks to protect heritage sites from encroachment and misuse.
- Develop responsible tourism policies focusing on cultural, environmental, and economic balance.
- Implement visitor management systems to reduce overcrowding and disruptions.
- *Promote cross-border collaborations for transnational tourism in shared heritage regions.*

2. Investment in heritage conservation and infrastructure

- Allocate public-private funding for restorations using authentic, eco-friendly materials.
- Develop responsible infrastructure: responsible transport, biodegradable accommodations, and low-impact facilities.
- *Use smart tourism technologies (e.g., virtual tours) to minimize strain on fragile sites.*
- Improve waste management, water conservation, and adopt renewable energy sources.

3. Community engagement and socioeconomic benefits

- Empower local communities by involving artisans, historians, and entrepreneurs in cultural tourism.
- *Reinvest tourism revenue into local development, education, and infrastructure.*
- Encourage faith-based and Halal tourism with certified accommodations and prayer facilities.
- Introduce heritage education programs to promote respectful engagement with Islamic history.

4. Technology integration and digital transformation

- *Create digital archives, 3D reconstructions, and VR tours for wider access and reduced physical impact.*
- Implement block chain for transparent tracking of funding, restoration, and tourism revenues.
- Use AI-based systems for smart ticketing and crowd control at sacred sites.

5. Responsible pilgrimage and religious tourism management

- Establish legal frameworks to protect heritage sites from encroachment and misuse.
- Adopt eco-friendly practices: carbon offsetting, electric transport, and responsible lodging.
- Upgrade pilgrimage facilities for better hygiene, waste management, and accessibility.
- *Diversify tourism offerings beyond peak pilgrimage seasons to reduce strain and boost local economies.*

6. International cooperation and best practices

- Establish legal frameworks to protect heritage sites from encroachment and misuse.
- Collaborate with UNESCO, ISESCO, and other bodies for best practices in heritage conservation.
- *Study case models like Alhambra (Spain), Istanbul's mosques, and Malaysia's Halal tourism for successful strategies.*
- Standardize international certification for global compliance in conservation and responsible tourism.

Conclusion

The intersection of Islamic heritage and responsible tourism presents both significant opportunities and complex challenges. So, a research-based approach highlights the necessity of a comprehensive framework that integrates heritage preservation, community engagement, economic sustainability, and environmental conservation. Key challenges include infrastructure deficits, fragmented governance, over-tourism, and the delicate balance of maintaining religious sanctity. Technology integration-through virtual reality tours, AI-based visitor management, and block chain for transparent funding-can further mitigate tourism's environmental footprint while enhancing cultural accessibility. Community participation remains essential, ensuring local populations benefit from tourism through job creation, entrepreneurship, and educational programs. Ultimately, a paradigm shift is required-one that prioritizes long-term sustainability over short-term economic gains. This demands multi-stakeholder collaboration among governments, private sectors, local communities, and international organizations. By promoting responsible tourism, fostering innovation, and implementing comprehensive policies, Islamic heritage tourism can evolve into a powerful catalyst for economic progress, cultural preservation, and global understanding, securing its legacy for future generations.

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