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## Bangladesh tourist arrivals surge over 60pc in India during 2023

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**Special Correspondent:** Lack of strong political commitment, mistrust among political leaders in South Asia, security issues, and the poor vision of bureaucrats perhaps stand in the way of launching on-arrival visas between Bangladesh and India despite the expectations of most tourists in both South Asian countries, sources said.

Bangladesh and India enjoy warm relations in multilateral sectors, with trade between the two countries growing steadily over the years.

Now policymakers of Dhaka and New Delhi have come to realize that both countries can start working on models for on-arrival visas between the two neighboring countries.

Politicians, diplomats, business leaders, and policymakers observed that India should consider issuing on-arrival visas to Bangladeshi nationals considering the sustained economic growth of Bangladesh, emergence of a rising upper middle class and middle class, especially the sufferings of patients seeking treatment in the neighboring countries.

The 2024 edition of Henley Passport Index, the most widely-accepted rating of global travel documents, placed the Bangladeshi passport at 97th position.

According to the 2024 edition of the Henley Passport Index, the most widely-accepted rating of global travel documents, the Bangladeshi passport ranks 97th.

In South Asia, the Bangladeshi passport fared better compared to that of Nepal (98), Pakistan (101) and Afghanistan (104).

The Henley Passport Index, the only one of its kind based on unique data from the International Air Transport Authority (IATA), has historical data going back 19 years. The database lists 227 travel destinations and 199 passports.

Bangladeshi tourist arrivals in India in 2023 posted over 60 per cent growth compared to the previous year, with some 20,56,880 Bangladeshi tourists visiting the neighboring country in 2023 as compared to some 12,55,960 Bangladeshi tourists in 2022.

Bangladeshi tourists (22.27 per cent) also retained the top position in neighboring India during the January-December period of 2023, followed by the United States (17.79 per cent), the UK (9.68 per cent), Canada (9.68 per cent), and Australia (4.05 per cent), according to the data of the Tourism Ministry of the government of India.

Foreign tourists' arrivals (FTA) during the period of January-December 2023 were 92,36,108 as compared to 64,37,467 in January-December 2022 and 1,09,30,355 in January-December 2019, registering a growth of 43.5% and -15.5% with respect to 2022 and 2019, respectively.

Besides tourists, several thousand Bangladeshi students are pursuing higher education in elementary schools and several lakh to get better treatment in different parts of India.

India's inbound tourism sector is experiencing a significant rebound, with foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) in 2023 surging 64 per cent compared with 2022. This translates to 92,36,108 visitors between January and December 2023, compared with 64,37,467 in the same period of the previous year. However, despite this impressive growth, the sector remains 15.5 per cent below pre-pandemic levels recorded in 2019, according to the Ministry of Tourism's data.

The percentage share of foreign tourist arrivals in India during January- December, 2022 among the top 15 source countries was the highest from USA (22.19%), followed by Bangladesh (20.29%), UK (9.98%), Australia (5.96%), Canada (4.48%), Sri Lanka (2.87%), Nepal (2.19%), Germany (2.01%), Singapore (1.89%), Malaysia (1.88%), France (1.79%), Russian Federation (1.54%), Maldives (1.14%), Portugal (1.10%), & Italy (0.97%).

Experts predict continued growth in the inbound tourism sector, with Virendra Jain, co-founder and CEO of VIDEC Consultants, expressing optimism for 2024. Virendra Jain, co-founder and CEO of VIDEC Consultants said, "While outbound travel has almost restored to its pre-pandemic highs, inbound travel is expected to consolidate its recovery next year, according to the Indian newspapers, according to media reports.

Meanwhile, India is considering to issue on-arrival visas for Bangladeshi nationals, said Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Kumar Verma said in a meeting with Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Faruque Khan at his office at the secretariat in Dhaka recently.

The Indian high commissioner said several Indian entrepreneurs showed keen interest to invest in Bangladesh's tourism industry.

"Especially India is interested in establishing air connectivity among India's North-Eastern states and Bangladesh", said the high commissioner.

Meanwhile, State Minister of Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury said that India should issue on-arrival visas to Bangladeshi, particularly to patients seeking treatment in the neighboring country.

A top leader of the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB) while talking to this correspondent said that High Commission of India should increase the manpower and ease sufferings of thousands of Bangladeshi visa seekers.

A Bangladeshi visa seeker has to stand in long queue with the India Visa Application Centre at the Jamuna Future Park to deposit his or her visa application form.

RezaulEkram, Bangladesh Chapter President at South Asia Tourism Federation, while talking to this correspondent said that India should consider issuing on-arrival visa to Bangladeshi as the country has become an emerging economy in the region.

He said that Bangladesh also witnessed the enviable economic growth in the last 50 years and will become economic power house in the coming days. He said that both Bangladesh and India should ease the visa process to speed the movement of the tourist.

Rezaul Karim, also proprietor and CEO at Entourage BD, said tourism sectors of both countries will benefit provided on-arrival visa system is introduced.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is set to propose substantial amendments to its travel agreement with India, focusing on enhanced convenience and flexibility for citizens travelling between the two countries.

The proposed changes include issuing visas that allow travel through any check-post and offering flexibility for long-term medical treatments, such as allowing multiple travel.

The existing travel agreement, initiated on 1 September 1972, and last revised in January 2013, expired recently, prompting Bangladesh to present a comprehensive proposal for its renewal.

An inter-ministerial meeting gathered opinions and recommendations from relevant stakeholders, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education, and the Ministry of Shipping.

Following the meeting, the finalised proposal will be sent to the Indian side through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, initiating a mutual exchange of opinions before the agreement is renewed.

Bangladesh issues various visas to India, including diplomatic and official visas, short-term double-entry visas, long-term multiple-entry tourist visas, medical visas, long-term employment visas, visas for investors or businessmen, visas for journalists, visas for research scholars or fellows working in educational or research institutions, visas for students, transit visas, and double entry visas.

Crucially, there is no visa fee for travel to Bangladesh and India. In emergencies, citizens can obtain instant visas in exchange for a service charge, though this provision is seldom utilised.

Bangladesh's proposed amendments seek to streamline and enhance the travel experience for citizens of both countries.

With a significant influx of people from Bangladesh visiting India each year for education, medical care, employment, business, and tourism, these changes are poised to foster a more seamless and convenient travel relationship.

According to data from the Bureau of Immigration of India, Bangladesh contributed substantially to India's tourism sector in 2022, with 20% of tourists originating from Bangladesh, making it the second-highest contributor after the United States.

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