

Unlocking the Untapped Potential of Chittagong Hill Tracts: Overcoming Barriers to Attract International Tourists and Boost Bangladesh's Tourism Economy

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Abstract

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) possesses enormous untapped potential as a leading tourist destination in Bangladesh, with the opportunity to considerably increase the country's tourism sector. However, security concerns, a lack of infrastructure development, and insufficient marketing hamper its potential to attract international tourists. The article examines the actions required to overcome these challenges, highlighting the need of increasing security, investing in tourism infrastructure, and adopting effective marketing initiatives. By addressing these difficulties, Bangladesh may unlock the CHT's full potential and drive itself to the forefront of the global tourism industry.

Keywords: *Tourism economy, International tourists. Untapped potential, Security concerns, Infrastructure development, Eco-tourism, Cultural tourism, Marketing strategies, Sustainable growth, Destination branding.*

1. Introduction

Bangladesh, a South Asian country known for its lush green landscape and numerous waterways, has been experiencing a steady growth in its tourism industry over the past decade (Rahman, 2021). However, CHT, a picturesque region in southeastern Bangladesh with its distinct cultural heritage and ecological diversity, remains an untapped resource with immense potential for international tourism (Ali, Sarker, & Rahman, 2020). Unlocking this potential could significantly boost the country's tourism economy, contributing to the nation's socio-economic development and providing opportunities for local communities (Karim & Chandra, 2017).

CHT, covering approximately 13,295 square kilometers, is a mosaic of hills, valleys, forests, and rivers, home to various indigenous groups with rich cultural traditions (Rasul, 2014). These unique features present numerous opportunities for ecotourism, cultural tourism, and adventure tourism, which are popular among international tourists (Roy, Nabi, & Rahman, 2019). However, despite the region's promising potential, it faces several barriers that hinder its attractiveness to international tourists.

Among these barriers, the long-standing political instability and security concerns in the CHT are significant factors that deter international tourists (Islam, 2018). Furthermore, inadequate infrastructure, limited accommodation options, and lack of tourism facilities exacerbate the region's struggle to attract international visitors (Roy et al., 2019). Additionally, weak marketing strategies, absence of a cohesive brand identity, and insufficient information about the region's attractions contribute to the underdevelopment of the CHT as an international tourism destination (Karim & Chandra, 2017).

This article aims to explore the untapped potential of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, identifying key barriers to its development as a major international tourism destination, and proposing actionable strategies to overcome these obstacles. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on sustainable tourism development in Bangladesh, offering insights for policymakers and stakeholders to harness the full potential of the CHT for the benefit of the country's tourism economy.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this article are as follows:

- To provide an overview of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a tourism destination, highlighting its diverse offerings in eco-tourism, MICE tourism, and other types of tourism experiences.
- To identify and analyze the key challenges and barriers that deter international tourists from visiting the Chittagong Hill Tracts, including insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic obstacles.
- To examine the potential economic and social impact of increased international tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, focusing on areas such as local economic development, job creation, and overall contribution to Bangladesh's tourism sector.
- To propose feasible strategies and solutions for overcoming the identified challenges and barriers, with the aim of attracting more international tourists to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and boosting Bangladesh's tourism economy.
- To foster a broader understanding of the significance of promoting the Chittagong Hill Tracts as an international tourism destination and to emphasize the potential benefits for both the local communities and Bangladesh as a whole.

3. Literature Review:

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) has been the subject of numerous studies, which have explored various aspects of the region's tourism potential and the challenges it faces in attracting international tourists. This literature review seeks to summarize the main findings from these studies and highlight the gaps in the existing body of knowledge.

3.1 Tourism Potential in the Chittagong Hill Tracts:

Rasul and Hussain (2015) provided a comprehensive analysis of the sustainable tourism development prospects in the CHT, emphasizing the region's unique natural beauty, biodiversity, and indigenous cultural heritage. Mohsin (2018) echoed these sentiments, underscoring the need to promote CHT's various tourism offerings, including eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and MICE tourism, to attract a diverse array of international tourists.

3.2 Challenges and Barriers to International Tourism:

Numerous studies have highlighted the challenges faced by the CHT in attracting international tourists. Roy (2016) identified insecurity as a major deterrent for foreign visitors, stemming from the region's history of conflict and continued instability. In addition, Rasul and Hussain (2015) and Islam (2016) pointed to the lack of adequate infrastructure, such as transportation and accommodation facilities, as a significant barrier to international tourism in the CHT. Bureaucratic hurdles, such as the cumbersome process of obtaining permission from the home ministry, were also cited as an obstacle for foreign tourists (Roy, 2016).

3.3 Economic and Social Impact of Tourism:

Research on the potential economic and social impact of increased international tourism in the CHT has been relatively limited. However, Islam (2016) noted that the development of the tourism sector could lead to local economic growth, job creation, and increased foreign exchange earnings for Bangladesh. Similarly, Rasul and Hussain (2015) argued that sustainable tourism development in the CHT could contribute to poverty alleviation and improved livelihoods for local communities.

3.4 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges:

While several studies have identified the challenges faced by the CHT in attracting international tourists, there has been limited research on the strategies to overcome these barriers. This article aims to fill this gap by proposing targeted solutions and recommendations to address the issues of insecurity, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic hurdles.

4. Methodology:

This article employs a qualitative research approach to explore the untapped potential of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) as a prime destination for international tourism and to identify the barriers that deter foreign visitors. The qualitative method is well-suited to this study, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex issues surrounding the CHT's tourism sector and provides a comprehensive analysis of the region's potential and challenges.

The following steps were undertaken in the research process:

4.1 Data Collection:

Primary and secondary data sources were utilized for this study. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the tourism industry, including local government officials, tourism experts, and representatives from local community-based organizations. These interviews provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by the CHT in attracting international tourists, as well as potential strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Secondary data was gathered through an extensive review of existing literature, including academic articles, government reports, and other relevant publications. This literature review helped to establish a strong foundation for the analysis and provided context for the primary data collected.

4.2 Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from the interviews and literature review. This approach involved identifying recurring themes and patterns within the data, which were then grouped into categories and subcategories. The identified themes were further analyzed to uncover the underlying issues and potential solutions related to the CHT's tourism potential and the challenges faced in attracting international tourists.

4.3 Validation and Triangulation:

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was employed. This involved cross-checking the information and insights gathered from the interviews with the secondary data obtained from the literature review. This process allowed for the verification of the findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

By employing a qualitative research approach, this article aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the Chittagong Hill Tracts' untapped potential for international tourism, the barriers that hinder its development, and the strategies required to overcome these challenges. The findings and recommendations presented in this study can contribute to the development of targeted interventions to unlock the CHT's potential as a prime tourism destination, attracting international tourists, and boosting Bangladesh's tourism economy.

5. Findings and Analysis:

Drawing from the primary and secondary data collected, this study uncovers key findings related to the Chittagong Hill Tracts' (CHT) potential for international tourism, the barriers to attracting foreign visitors, and the strategies required to overcome these challenges.

5.1 Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Rich Tourist Destination

The CHT boasts remarkable natural beauty, diverse ecosystems, and rich cultural heritage (Rasul & Hussain, 2015). The region offers a wide range of tourism experiences, including eco-tourism, cultural tourism, and MICE tourism, which cater to various tourist preferences (Mohsin, 2018; Islam, 2016). However, despite its abundance of attractions, the CHT has predominantly attracted local tourists, with foreign visitors remaining scarce (Rasul & Hussain, 2015).

Table 1: Major Tourist Attractions in Chittagong Hill Tracts

<u>Attraction</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Description</u>
Sajek Valley	Rangamati	Scenic hilltop valley with panoramic views
Kaptai Lake	Rangamati	The largest artificial lake in Bangladesh
Nafakhum Waterfall	Bandarban	Spectacular waterfall in the heart of the forest
Nilgiri Hill Resort	Bandarban	Hilltop resort with breathtaking views
Alutila Cave	Khagrachhari	Mysterious cave with natural springs

5.2 Barriers to International Tourism in Chittagong Hill Tracts

Despite its potential, the Chittagong Hill Tracts has experienced limited growth in international tourism. Key barriers to international tourism in the region include:

- Security Concerns*
One of the primary challenges identified in this study is the perception of insecurity in the CHT, which deters foreign tourists (Roy, 2016). Interviewees cited the region's history of conflict and continued instability as factors contributing to this perception. The region has a history of ethnic conflict and unrest, which has raised concerns about safety and security among potential tourists (Rashid, 2015). A stable political environment is crucial for attracting international visitors.
- Limited Infrastructure*
Poor infrastructure, including inadequate transportation, accommodation, and communication facilities, hampers the region's ability to cater to the needs of international tourists (Islam & Hasan, 2017).
- Limited Marketing and Promotion*
The Chittagong Hill Tracts has not been effectively marketed as a tourist destination, with little presence in international travel guides and media (Khan & Ahmed, 2013). This has resulted in low awareness and visibility among potential international tourists.
- The study also found that inadequate infrastructure, such as transportation and accommodation facilities, poses a significant barrier to international tourism in the CHT (Rasul & Hussain, 2015; Islam, 2016). Limited connectivity, poor road conditions, and insufficient high-quality lodging options were commonly reported issues.
- Bureaucratic Barriers*: The requirement for foreign tourists to obtain permission from the home ministry before visiting the CHT is another hurdle (Roy, 2016). Interviewees expressed concerns that the bureaucratic process is cumbersome, time-consuming, and may discourage potential foreign visitors.

Overall, the findings of this study reveal the immense potential of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a prime destination for international tourism, as well as the challenges and barriers that must be overcome to fully realize this potential. By addressing these issues and implementing targeted strategies, Bangladesh can unlock the CHT's untapped potential, attract international tourists, and significantly boost its tourism economy.

6. Discussion

In this article, we have explored the untapped potential of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) as a key destination for international tourists and the potential it holds for boosting Bangladesh's tourism economy. According to the Bangladesh Tourism Board (2020), the total number of international tourist arrivals in Bangladesh was approximately 267,000 in 2019. However, this number is relatively low when compared to other countries in the region, such as India, which welcomed over 10 million international tourists during the same period (World Bank,

2021). In order to unlock the potential of the CHT and increase international tourist arrivals, it is essential to address and overcome the barriers that have limited the growth of the region's tourism industry.

Table 2: International tourist arrivals in South Asia (2019)

<u>Country</u>	<u>Tourist Arrivals (in millions)</u>
Bangladesh	0.267
India	10.93
Nepal	1.17
Sri Lanka	1.91

(Source: World Bank, 2021)

6.1 Infrastructure Development

The lack of adequate infrastructure, such as transportation, accommodation, and basic amenities, has been a significant deterrent for international tourists visiting the CHT. According to a study conducted by Rahman et al. (2018), the quality of the existing infrastructure in the region received a mean score of 2.43 out of 5, indicating that it is below average in terms of meeting the expectations of international tourists. To overcome this barrier, the government should prioritize and invest in the construction of well-connected roads, airports, and other transportation facilities. Additionally, it is crucial to encourage private investments in the development of hotels, resorts, and eco-tourism facilities, ensuring international standards are met while respecting the region's unique environment and culture.

Table 3: Infrastructure quality in CHT (Rahman et al., 2018)

<u>Infrastructure Type</u>	<u>Mean Score (out of 5)</u>
Transportation	2.56
Accommodation	2.39
Basic amenities	2.34
Average	2.43

In addition to transportation, the CHT needs more international-standard accommodations. Encouraging private investors to establish hotels, resorts, and eco-lodges can help meet the demands of international tourists and boost the local economy. It is also essential to ensure that these accommodations adhere to sustainable practices, preserving the region's environment and cultural heritage (Rahman et al., 2018).

The government should invest in improving basic amenities such as electricity, clean water supply, and telecommunications services. These amenities are crucial for providing a comfortable and seamless experience for tourists visiting the region (Rahman et al., 2018).

6.2 Political Stability and Security

To ensure political stability and security in the CHT, the government should foster a dialogue that includes all stakeholders, such as indigenous communities, political parties, and civil society organizations. By addressing historical grievances and promoting reconciliation, the government can create an environment conducive to peace and stability, which is essential for tourism development (Roy et al., 2019).

Furthermore, increasing the presence of law enforcement agencies and introducing community-based policing can help improve security in the region. This would create a safer environment for both tourists and local communities, building trust and encouraging more international visitors to explore the CHT (Roy et al., 2019).

6.3 Marketing and Promotion

To effectively market and promote the CHT as a tourist destination, the government and private sector should work together to develop a cohesive and appealing brand identity for the region. This brand identity can be promoted through various channels such as digital marketing, print media, and international tourism expos, targeting potential tourists from around the world (Kabir et al., 2020).

Moreover, leveraging the power of social media and partnering with influencers can help showcase the CHT's unique attractions, such as its vibrant culture, rich biodiversity, and breathtaking landscapes. Collaborating with international travel agencies and tour operators can also help create customized travel packages, making it easier for tourists to plan their visit to the region (Kabir et al., 2020).

7. Recommendations

Based on the analysis presented in this article, the following recommendations are proposed to unlock the untapped potential of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and attract international tourists to boost Bangladesh's tourism economy:

7.1 Enhance security measures

To address security concerns, the government should collaborate with local communities and law enforcement agencies to design and implement comprehensive security plans for the region. These measures may include increasing police presence, installing CCTV cameras, and establishing tourist information centers for assistance (World Bank, 2019).

7.2 Develop tourism infrastructure

Investment in transportation, accommodation, and amenities is crucial to improve the region's accessibility and overall tourist experience. For example, upgrading roads and airports, promoting public-private partnerships for hotel development, and supporting eco-friendly initiatives will create a more attractive environment for visitors (UNWTO, 2020).

7.3 Strengthen eco-tourism and cultural tourism

According to a study by Rahman et al. (2017), eco-tourism and cultural tourism are the most promising sectors for sustainable growth in the CHT. Developing these sectors would involve preserving the natural environment, supporting local communities, and promoting indigenous cultures.

7.4 Implement strategic marketing efforts

A cohesive marketing campaign that highlights the unique attractions of the CHT is essential to raise awareness among potential international tourists. This includes developing a strong destination brand, leveraging digital platforms, and partnering with international travel agencies and organizations (Kotler et al., 2017).

7.5 Foster international collaborations

To boost the region's global appeal, Bangladesh should collaborate with other countries and international organizations to promote tourism in the CHT. For instance, engaging in bilateral agreements or participating in international tourism fairs can increase visibility and attract foreign investment (UNCTAD, 2018).

7.6 Streamlining Bureaucratic Processes

Simplifying the process for foreign tourists to obtain permission to visit the CHT is necessary for reducing entry barriers (Roy, 2016). This could involve digitizing the application process, providing clear guidelines, and reducing processing times.

7.7 Promoting the CHT

Raising global awareness of the CHT as a prime travel destination is vital for attracting international tourists. Targeted marketing campaigns, participation in international tourism fairs, and collaboration with foreign tour operators can help to promote the region's unique offerings (Mohsin, 2018). A comprehensive marketing strategy, including collaborations with international travel agencies, should be developed to promote the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a unique and attractive tourist destination (Khan & Ahmed, 2013).

7.8 Potential Economic Impact of Tourism Growth in Chittagong Hill Tracts

Increasing international tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts can have substantial economic benefits for Bangladesh, including job creation, foreign exchange earnings, and regional development.

- **Sustainable Tourism Development**

While unlocking the potential of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, it is essential to ensure sustainable tourism development that preserves the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage. Sustainable tourism initiatives should focus on:

- **Community-Based Tourism**

Promoting community-based tourism, which involves local communities in planning, development, and management, can ensure that tourism benefits are shared equitably and that the region's unique cultural heritage is preserved (Rasul, 2016).

- **Eco-Tourism**

Emphasizing eco-tourism, which minimizes the environmental impact of tourism activities and promotes conservation, can help protect the region's rich biodiversity and natural landscapes (Hossain & Chowdhury, 2018).

- **Capacity Building** Investing in capacity building, such as training programs for local communities, can enhance their skills and knowledge, enabling them to participate in and benefit from the tourism industry (Rasul, 2016).

By implementing these recommendations and focusing on sustainable tourism development, the Chittagong Hill Tracts can become an attractive international tourist destination, offering unique experiences while preserving its natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

8. Conclusion

CHT offers a wealth of untapped potential as a premier tourist destination in Bangladesh. With its lush landscapes, diverse cultural heritage, and remarkable natural attractions, the region holds the promise of transforming the nation's tourism industry and contributing significantly to its economic growth. However, to unlock this potential, a concerted effort must be made by both the government and private sector stakeholders to address the barriers limiting international tourist arrivals.

First and foremost, improving security and fostering a stable environment are essential for attracting international tourists. This involves implementing effective policies and strategies to promote peace and stability in

the region while also ensuring the protection of tourists and local communities alike. In addition, efforts must be made to counter negative perceptions surrounding the CHT to build trust and confidence among potential visitors.

Investing in tourism infrastructure is another critical aspect of attracting international tourists. Improved transportation networks, accommodations, and amenities will not only enhance the overall visitor experience but also help in showcasing the unique offerings of the region. Furthermore, strengthening the region's eco-tourism and cultural tourism sectors will create a more diversified and sustainable tourism industry.

Lastly, strategic marketing and promotion efforts are vital to raising awareness about the Chittagong Hill Tracts among international tourists. This can be achieved through the development of a cohesive brand identity, targeted marketing campaigns, and forging partnerships with international travel agencies and organizations. Social media platforms and digital channels can also play a significant role in showcasing the region's attractions and promoting it as a must-visit destination.

In the end, unlocking the untapped potential of the Chittagong Hill Tracts requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach. By addressing the barriers and capitalizing on the region's unique selling points, Bangladesh can not only attract international tourists but also foster sustainable growth and development in the tourism industry. The time is ripe for the country to seize this opportunity and leverage the rich potential of the CHT to cement its position as a sought-after destination in the global tourism landscape.

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