

Potential of Heritage Tourism for the Sustainable Development of Jiaganj-Azimganj Planning Area, Murshidabad, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Murshidabad, a small municipal town was once the capital of undivided Bengal and now is a popular tourist destination mostly for weekend travelers due to its rich historical past. For the last three decades, the growth of tourism in Murshidabad has been phenomenal, hence many of the local population solely depends on the movement of the tourists. The interesting fact is that, to date, Murshidabad tourism is known for Hazarduari Palace and Museum, keeping other historical places out of the reach of the tourists. The purpose of this study is to explore the other tourist destinations located around Murshidabad and develop sustainable tourism locations that can improve the livelihood of the local people. Initially, a pilot study is conducted to understand the socio-economic conditions of the people living in that area and those people are identified who directly or indirectly related to tourism activities in the study area. The study helps to explore long-neglected areas of Murshidabad, located in Jiaganj-Azimganj Municipality. Although basic tourism circuit infrastructure is readily available but neglected for a long period. It is important to link the existing facilities with the livelihood of the people to develop a sustainable tourism model. It is also observed that most of the tourists have no information about these places though, they are as good as the present tourism destinations of West Bengal. The paper suggests a model for heritage tourism that can be promoted to get the desired result which helps the potential tourists to revisit the long-lost history of undivided Bengal.

Keywords: Culture; Heritage Tourism; Sustainable Development; Potentiality.

Introduction

Tourism is seen as a vital activity for nations because of its significant impact on the social, cultural, educational, and economic aspects of national societies, as well as their international relations (UNESCO, 2003). Tourism stimulates economic activities by leveraging its multiplier effects and capitalising on local, cultural, and natural assets beneficially (Petronela, 2016). The Planning Commission of India has officially recognized tourism as the second largest sector in the country in terms of its capacity to generate employment

possibilities for individuals with low-skilled and semi-skilled abilities. Heritage tourism is now a prominent aspect of the worldwide tourism business, especially in countries aiming to move away from relying solely on beach and resort tourism. This increase has had significant impacts on the way tangible and intangible heritage are presented and represented in the context of tourism. The notion of heritage is constantly transforming in response to its rapidly changing political, economic, and socio-cultural environment. Historical tourism must interact with modern globalized communities and societies, which have become

increasingly integrated but aim to maintain their unique local characteristics. India inherently boasts a diverse array of tourist locations, predominantly characterized by natural landscapes and historical landmarks. Statistics indicate a significant increase in the demand for tourism over a period of ten years. However, there is a lack of sufficient tourist infrastructure, coordination at all levels, a tourism master plan, and flexible circuit design.

Heritage connotes a feeling of stability and uninterrupted existence, while tourism inherently represents a type of contemporary progress and consumerism (Wang et al., 2023). Nevertheless, heritage has gained increased popularity and prominence in modern tourism development. The recent transformation has resulted in escalating and persistent disputes between the concepts of cultural preservation and tourism advancement. Although there is a growing trend in developing tourism in heritage sites and events, there is a strong underlying desire to save and conserve the historical significance and cultural legacy of these places. Heritage planning and management face a dilemma between preserving the past for its inherent worth and adapting to the rapidly changing present.

The World Tourism Organisation defines Heritage tourism as the act of fully engaging with the natural history, cultural heritage, arts, philosophy, and institutions of a different location or country. Heritage tourism encompasses a range of experiences that centre around natural, cultural, and historical resources, which are utilised as commodities for sale in the tourism business. The sustainable development of heritage resources is crucial as it allows us to utilise our resources at an optimal level and ensure their preservation for future generations. Sustainable historical tourism is centred around utilising the remembered past to enhance the appeal of a specific place while ensuring its core and inherent significance are protected and its structural state is consistently revitalised. The concept of sustainability in heritage tourism pertains to the enduring viability of the heritage commodity, contingent upon the extent to which its economic, environmental, and sociocultural systems are efficient, integrated, and consistently perpetuated in the distant future (Hall and Page, 2009).

Murshidabad is primarily distinguished by its historical and cultural tourism attractions. A total of 12 specific places have been identified for this matter. Significant grounds were built during the Hindu, Nawabi, and British Colonial eras. Currently, a portion of them is preserved

and managed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the local government. The primary association of Murshidabad is with the Hazarduari Palace, which has been transformed into a museum and is situated in Lalbagh. The most ancient areas in the district consist of the unearthed remains of Karnasubarna, which was the former capital of King Sasanka. A collection of extraordinary terracotta temples, representing both Hindu and Jain religions, can be seen in Azimgunj, Jiaganj, and Panchthupi. These temples have origins that may be traced back to the local authority of Jitpur, which is situated in the eastern region of the district. The River Padma in Jalangi is a prominent scenic attraction because of its advantageous international position between India and Bangladesh, as well as its exceptional panoramic perspective. In addition to its artifacts and picturesque sites, Murshidabad also draws a substantial number of local tourists during various festivals and fairs that take place in different seasons (Sinha et al., 2019).

In this study, authors have identified two towns of Murshidabad, namely Jiaganj and Azimganj that are situated on opposing banks of the Baghirathi River. Jiaganj, also known as Ziaganj, is located on the eastern bank of the river, while Azimganj is situated on the western bank. Jiaganj and Azimganj, twin towns, held significant trade importance during the Subah era in Bengal. They were regarded as the 'Baranasi of Bengal' under the reign of Rani Bhabani, a prominent landlord in Bengal. Additionally, it served as a sacred site for the Vaishnava culture throughout a certain historical period. Due to the plentiful supply of silk, muslin, ivory, and valuable agricultural produce, the entire region had emerged as the hub of thriving economic endeavours in nineteenth-century Bengal. Several families, particularly Jains, were drawn to this area due to the potential for trade and banking. As a result, numerous Jain temples have remained intact on both sides of the river, serving as evidence of this. This historic municipal town has been inhabited by people of various religions, castes, creeds, languages, and cultures for over a century. The municipal territory is filled with the peaceful presence of Temples, Mosques, Churches, and Gurudwara¹. Though these two cities are historically rich but not that renowned to the tourists compared to other tourist spots of Murshidabad. This study aims to investigate historically overlooked regions inside Murshidabad. Despite the availability of basic tourism circuit infrastructure, it has been ignored for an extended period.

¹<https://jiaganjazimganj.blogspot.com/> accessed on 17.3.2024

Literature Review

Researchers have investigated cultural identity in sustainable tourism studies. The distinctive cultural heritage resources serve as the defining characteristic that sets a location apart from others and also serve as the foundation for attracting tourists (Zhang, 2016). Conservation of cultural assets, preservation of traditional values, and facilitation of authentic tourist experiences are widely seen as crucial components of sustainable tourism (Bond & Falk, 2013). Travel experience encompasses a tourist's need for self-awareness and their impression of the destination and the experience that satisfies these demands (Zhang, 2016). Tourist identification has a significant impact on the overall travel experience. The recognition of cultural identity represents a higher level of familiarity with the tourism experience. The identity of tourism products in the context of intangible cultural heritage tourism is crucial for tourists with diverse origins, as it significantly influences their tourism experience and consumption. The concept of identity encompasses various exterior manifestations, including the cultural identity associated with intangible cultural resources. Many scholars have examined the relationship between cultural identity and the sustainable development of intangible cultural resources from the standpoint of cultural identity. Nevertheless, the majority of inhabitants in protected regions of intangible cultural property lack a distinct cultural identity characterised by a strong sense of history and purpose (van & Go, 2006). Cultural and Heritage Tourism serves as a mechanism for fostering economic development by enticing external visitors to a host community. These visitors are primarily driven by their fascination with the historical, artistic, scientific, or lifestyle/heritage aspects of the community, region, group, or institution (Silberberg, 1995). According to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (2002), cultural and heritage visitors tend to have longer stayed and spend more money compared to other types of travellers. As a result, this type of tourism plays a significant role in promoting economic growth.

A significant number of historic sites and their corresponding sacred landscapes are linked to mythology and preserved through the practice of pilgrimage. These locations also have symbolic representations and icons, encompassing both natural and cultural elements. Pilgrims and devotees frequent these sites for spiritual restoration and to encounter the ethereal essence of the location. These locations require meticulous attention and conservation due to their ability to inspire individuals to encounter mystical or transpersonal aspects of nature

(Rana & Singh, 2000). In an era characterised by escalating human interference, the degradation of cultural and natural places poses a significant threat, rendering their extinction an irreversible loss. Consequently, the protection of these sites becomes a matter of collective concern.

Tourism is often regarded as a means of safeguarding and preserving natural and cultural resources. Nevertheless, tourism exerts numerous detrimental impacts on the environmental and social systems of cultural heritage. It is imperative to advocate for the promotion of heritage tourism within the context of sustainability and an environmentally conscious framework. In their work titled "Tourism-based heritage conservation in Murshidabad: an appraisal," Paul and Roy (2017) conducted a study on the topic of built heritage-centric tourism, neglecting the importance of conservation efforts in preserving the authenticity and meaningful existence of historic monuments. In the Indian context, the development of suitable tourist infrastructure necessitates substantial financial investment, which should be optimised considering the financial limitations. Therefore, before investing in tourism, a local government must have a thorough understanding of the status of the different tourist resources, their level of attractiveness, and the levels of tourist demand. All these factors are linked to the tourist capacity of a region.

Methodology

The researcher endeavoured to comprehend a phenomenon by adopting the viewpoint of the interviewee. This investigation was conducted using qualitative interviews and field observation in two specific case study regions. This research is deemed suitable for employing a qualitative research technique due to its capacity to facilitate the collection of comprehensive information from descriptive data sources, such as government reports and archives, as well as primary sources, including interviews and observations. Through the utilisation of less rigid methodologies like open-ended interviews and conversations, the participants were afforded the chance to generate novel concepts and expand upon the researcher's existing knowledge, rather than being constrained by predetermined answers. The present study used a case study methodology to examine two distinct heritage tourist sites located in Murshidabad. While the scope of this study is confined to the examination of specific case studies, its implications extend to the comprehension of analogous communities in other developing countries.

Prospects in Study Area: A Search for Sustainable Tourism

Cultural heritage assets typically possess inherent historical significance due to their representation of specific historical epochs or periods, or their association with a particular patron. Heritage sites provide significant insights into various aspects of the historical era in which they were built, including age, technology, materials used, architectural design, political and religious influences, and other relevant factors. Additionally, they serve as abundant reservoirs of regional history. Additionally, they function as crucial study instruments for those doing investigations on the history and culture of a specific era and geographical area.

The river Ganges originates from the Goumukh mountain and branches near Dhuliyān in the Murshidabad district. These branches ultimately split our two cities, Jiaganj and Azimganj, which are in the Bay of Bengal. Numerous monarchs have resided in this town for extended periods, so underscoring the significance of the historical legacy that has been bequeathed to them. Examples of temples in the region are Chaar Bangla Temple, Panchamukhi Temple, Keshorkumari, and Baroduary. Numerous renowned individuals, like Dr. Balai Chand Mukhopadhyā, Rani Bhabani, Raja Rai Budh Singh, and others, have been born in this location, showcasing the diverse range of their contributions².

People from many religious backgrounds have migrated to this location and have chosen to reside here permanently due to their deep affection for it. Due to the presence of diverse religions and nationalities in this area, numerous temples have been constructed, each dedicated to a specific race, religion, and mosque. The town's primary source of income relies on agriculture, with the alluvial soil being well-suited for various crops such as rice, wheat, jute, chilies, eggplant, spinach, and mangoes. Additionally, a wide variety of high-quality vegetables are cultivated in the area. An Azimganj City Market has been established near the Azimganj City station, based on the availability of raw materials along the Bhagirathi River. The significance of this market extends beyond Azimganj or Jiaganj town, as the entire Murshidabad district relies on it due to its value as a market within the district. The Azimganj City market serves as a central hub for the distribution of high-quality vegetables. In Azimganj Town, near Azimganj JN. Station, there exists a diminutive market sometimes referred to as a mini-market. In addition, there exist many

industries such as the Tobacco Industry (Bidi Industry), the Silk Industry, the Biscuit Industry, and the Chanachur (Bombay mix) industry³.

There are fourteen Jain temples in these twin cities situated on both sides of the river Bhagirathi showcasing exemplary architectural beauty. This indo-Mughal-colonial temple beautifully depicts the amalgamation of Jain styles with the Muslim and European architecture. Ajimganj boasts a plethora of additional sites, locations, and monuments that are in dire need of restoration, preservation, and integration into sustainable heritage tourism initiatives. The sites encompass the Azimganj Rajbari, Charbangla Temple, Jagat Seth's House, and various other structures.

At the time of the pilot study, the interviewee was asked to say about the authenticity of these two cities. According to them,

"Azimganj and Jiaganj are the twin towns of Murshidabad district and is a beautiful place to visit. You will get to see rural Bengal at its best. Paddy and mustard fields, rivers, date palm trees, temples and the earthy smell. I could have stayed there for a lifetime!!!"

"It's a small town and a peaceful one. A trip to this town will give you a feel of rural Bengal. The town is near to the heritage Hazarduari. It was a great historical place. Rani vabani temple is great situated in this city. Many Jains temple is here."

"Azimganj was an important trade centre during the 17th / 18th Centuries and was considered by many as being the 'Varanasi of Bengal'. Because of the abundance of silk, muslin, ivory and rich agricultural yield the entire area became the centre of vigorous economic activities during the nineteenth century Attracted by the promise of trade and banking several families, especially Jains settled here, and as a result there are many Jain temples on both banks of the river. The old temples and historical sights are good to explore. It is also to take a walk through the villages by the river near the old temples".

The findings of the research offer significant insights that can serve as a point of reference for the advancement of intangible cultural heritage tourist sites. Tourism organisations operating in these areas must recognise that intangible cultural heritage is a distinctive tourism asset capable of yielding economic advantages for the advancement of tourism. The public's attention is

²<https://jiaganjazimganj.blogspot.com/2014/03/azimganj-murshidabad-our-dream-town.html>, accessed on 17.03.2024

³<https://jiaganjazimganj.blogspot.com/2014/03/azimganj-murshidabad-our-dream-town.html>, accessed on 17.3.2024

currently directed towards the sustainable growth of tourism.

Conclusion

Tourism plays a significant role in fostering economic development and facilitating the creation of employment opportunities. The tourist destinations of Jiaganj and Ajimganj possess significant potential and opportunity for the development of a substantial tourism sector, thereby contributing to the enhancement of the local population's standard of living. There is a lack of awareness among local residents regarding the need for commercial improvement. There exist numerous locations that exhibit promising potential and prospects for tourism. The current governmental plans are inadequate and unable to meet the demand due to their fragmented nature. Certain activities are now underway, while others are yet to be executed. Implementing all the current plans may lead to an improvement in the condition. Sustainable tourist development has the potential to effectively preserve and enhance intangible cultural assets. The sustainable utilisation of cultural resources in a region and nation can only be achieved when the original cultural ecology is effectively protected. This ensures that the current population's needs are met while also safeguarding the needs of future generations. Additionally, sustainable tourism development can enhance the distinctive cultural identity of tourist destinations, attract visitors, and foster their long-term growth.

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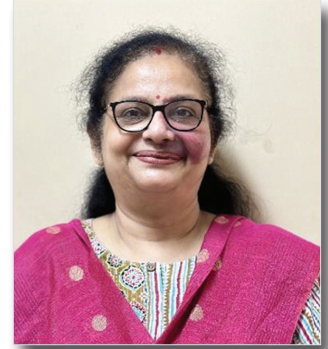
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