
‘NATURE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN PERIPHERAL AREAS, ITS PRESENT STATUS, IMPACT AND PROBLEMS – A STUDY OF NORTH BENGAL (INDIA)’

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines the nature tourism activity in the peripheral areas of North Bengal, the northern fringe of West Bengal in India. The objective of the study is to highlight the fact of how nature tourism activity has been flourished in the peripheral areas over time. Based on quantitative field surveys, the article's major findings illustrate the magnitude of present status of nature tourism in different peripheral areas of North Bengal. It also reflects an overview of its impact on the regional economy of the peripheral areas with six case studies. The paper concludes with some management strategies and actions for developing the nature tourism activity of the region.

KEYWORDS: *Peripheral areas; resource bases & spatial variations ; present status; impact; problems; recommendations*

Introduction

Tourism has been used as a strategy to promote regional development in both rural and urban areas for many governments at various stages of developments around the world. The building of a tourism cluster in developing economies can be a positive force in improving outlying infrastructure and dispersing economic activity (Sharpley & Telfer, 2006). This happens so that the tourism clusters invite foreign exchange earnings, generates employment and income in accommodation and transport sector and souvenir industry and accelerates the development of infrastructure. Nature tourism that emphasizes on education, management, development of sustainable tourism product and activity and wellbeing of the local people is not simply a marginal activity to finance protection of the environment but it has proved to be an engine of growth in many peripheral areas of the world. Thus nature tourism has been the backbone of economies of some peripheral areas of North Bengal, the northern part of the state of West Bengal in India. However, the present study first provides the concept of peripheral areas and their spatial variations of North Bengal. Then it proceeds to describe the present status of nature tourism activity of the peripheral areas and reflects an overview of its impact on the regional economy with suitable examples. Finally it outlines some management strategies and actions for development of the nature tourism activity of the region.

Objectives of the Present Study

The present paper embraces the following objectives

1. To discuss the concept of peripheral areas
2. To explore the present status of nature tourism of the peripheral areas.
3. To analyse the impact of nature tourism on the regional economy of the peripheral areas.
4. To suggest to policy makers, planners and academics that economically peripheral regions can be developed through the promotion of nature tourism.
5. To present the tourism scenario of the North Bengal region in the world tourism map.

Data Base and Methodology

The present study is mostly based on primary data generated through author's field survey and direct contact with tourists and common people of the region. The field surveys were conducted in a systematic manner in two phases. In the first phase for the present study the secondary data were collected from different sources like Divisional Forest Office, Koch Bihar (2008), Kunjnagar Eco-development Society(2008), Divisional Forest Office, Wildlife Division II, Jalpaiguri(2008), Lava Hotel Association (2008), Resort owners' Association, Lataguri (2008) and Mongpong Nature Centre(2008) during the period of October, November and December 2008.

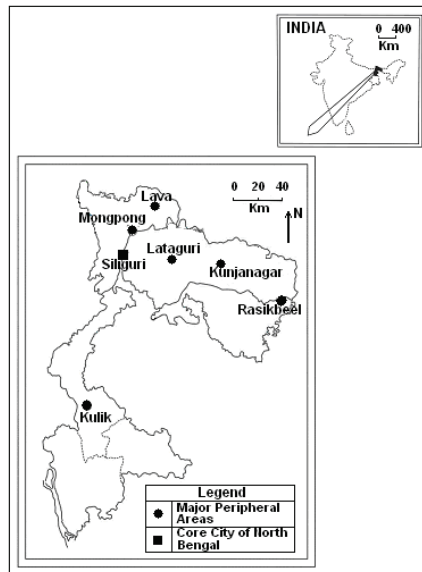


Fig. 1: Major Peripheral Areas of North Bengal

The second phase was related to the collection of primary data. To collect data on revenue generation, employment opportunities and infrastructural development field surveys were conducted. Surveys were carried out among 150 hotel owners and the local people at Lataguri during the month of December 2008.

However all these collected primary and secondary information were later on systematically processed, arranged, tabulated and analyzed to have a clear view of the nature tourism scenario of North Bengal. The information collected from primary and secondary sources have been verified with the field experience.

CONCEPT OF PERIPHERAL AREAS: Peripheral areas are geographically remote areas from mass markets (Hall & Boyd et al,2006). These areas located far away from the core areas of a region. Peripheral regions often retain high aesthetic

amenity values because of being relatively underdeveloped in relation to core areas. Such high natural values may not only serve as a basis for the development of nature tourism but may also be significant for other types of tourism and leisure developments, such as those associated with vacation homes (Hall & Muller, 2004). The periphery is characterized by relatively low levels of economic activity. Population is sparser, reflecting the greater reliance on agriculture and allied rural industries. There is often a long tradition of out migration to more favoured areas. Infrastructure and social amenities tend to be poorer (Brown et al 2000). Ironically, the very consequences of lack of development, the unspoiled character of the landscape and distinctive local cultures, become positive resources as far as tourism is concerned (Duffield & Long, 1981). In fact peripheral areas are characterized by a number of inter related features that impact on the development of nature based tourism, as well as other industry sectors (Botterill et al., 1997; Buhalis, 1997; Hall & Jenkins, 1998; Jenkins et al, 1998). These features of peripheral areas are as follows-

- Low levels of economic vitality and dependence on traditional industries such as agro based industries and handicrafts.

More rural and remote often with high scenic values

- Population falling through out migration
- Reliant on imported technologies and ideas
- Information flows within the periphery and from the periphery to the core are weaker than those from the core to the periphery (Botteril et al. 1997).
- Poor infrastructure and amenities
- Inter economic linkages tend to be weaker at the periphery than at the core thereby potentially limiting the ability to achieve high multiplier effects because of the substantial degree of importation of goods and services (Archer, 1989).
- Botteril (1997) have argued that peripheries tend to be characterized by a comparative lack of innovation as new products tend to be imported rather than developed locally.

Spatial Variations and Resource Bases of the Peripheral Areas:

The peripheral areas of North Bengal are sparsely distributed in four districts, i.e Darjiling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Uttar Dinajpur. There are a number of resource bases, which have laid the foundation of nature tourism activity in the region, and these are mostly geographical in character. In fact 'the attractions of tourism are, to a very large extent, geographical in their character'(Robinson 1979 :41).

The most rich nature tourism area lies in Jalpaiguri district. Lata guri (Gorumara) and Kunjanagar fall in this area. The Great Indian one horned Rhinoceros, Indian Elephant,

Gaur (Indian Bison), wonderful avifauna like Hornbill, Nature Interpretation Centre and the ethnic villages like Saraswati forest village, Budhram forest village,

Bichabhanga forest village, Chatua forest village and its people (Santal, Oraon, Munda tribes), their ways of life, traditions, folk-lore, arts and crafts etc. are the prime attractions of Lataguri. Again, the natural surroundings, murmuring of the Buri Torsha river, the Kunjanagar ecotourism park, ethnic cottages, observation tower, boating facility etc. have laid the foundation of nature tourism activity at Kunjanagar. The second rich nature tourism area lies in Darjiling district. Lava and Mongpong are the important nature tourism centres of this area. Lava has multi-faced personality. The rolling hills, beautiful oak, pine and fir trees, and flowers – all these elements beckon tourists here from different states of India and abroad. Again resting on the immediate foothill the surrounding beauty of Mongpong is also very attractive. It is the place where Teesta River descends into plains running from mountainous country. From here one can view the relic of British Raj- the Coronation Bridge.

The third nature tourism area covers the Koch Bihar and Uttar Dinajpur district. Rasik beel is an important nature tourism centre of Koch Bihar. ‘The Nature Interpretation Centre, birds like little Cormorant, large Egret, Open bill Stork, lesser adjutant Stork, lesser Pied King fisher, Braminy Kite, the Fish Aquarium, the Children Park, the Gharial (small sized Indian crocodile), Animal rescue centre and the Deer Park etc. have changed the Rasik Beel wetland into an eco tourist resort’ (Karmakar 2008:61). Kulik bird sanctuary of Uttar Dinajpur district is another nature tourism centre. The beauty of migratory birds, their lifestyle, and the surroundings of the Kulik sanctuary beckon the tourists. Apart from these Rasomati, Tekunia, Gorubathan, Kalimpong, Chalsa, Sandakphu, Phallut and Bhutan Ghat are also the rich potential peripheral nature tourism destinations which are sparsely distributed throughout the North Bengal.

Apart from these resource bases, there are several factors which have accelerated the growth of nature tourism at these sites. These are-

- Increased levels of green awareness
- Provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people
- Ecologically sustainable
- Environmentally educative
- The development of cheaper and faster access to new destination areas
- Respects local culture
- Generates tourist satisfaction
- Active participation of local people

Present Status of Nature Tourism:

To have a profile of present status of nature tourism activity of North Bengal the author has carried out intensive field surveys during the period of October, November and December 2008. These secondary data i.e tourist flow were picked up from the forest department, eco development committees, hotel and resort owners’ associations

of different nature tourism destinations such as Lataguri, Kunjanagar, Rasikbeel, Mongpong, Lava and Kulik. However from table 1 it is clear that peripheral areas of North Bengal have been receiving a number of eco tourists in different successive years.

Table 1: Number of Ecotourists in Selected Peripheral Areas of North Bengal

Year	Kunaj nagar	Lava	Lataguri	Rasik-beel	Mong-pong	Kulik	Total no. of Eco tourists
2001-02	13854	18903	13576	1738	11560	1189	60820
2002-03	14080	20411	14225	2328	13281	1231	65556
2003-04	14350	20948	16579	1851	15382	1303	70413
2004-05	16065	23104	19791	1251	16530	1376	78117
2005-06	18530	24321	23514	1248	20105	1577	89295
2006-07	17340	25602	27730	1343	15356	1650	89021
2007-08	20121	21567	37631	2089	12209	1756	95373
Percentage growth rate of tourist inflow from 2001 to 08	45.24%	14.09%	177.19%	20.20%	5.61%	47.69%	56.81%

Sources: Divisional Forest Officer ,Kochbihar(2008), Kunjnagar Eco Development Society(2008), Divisional Forest Officer, Wildlife Division Ii, Jalpaiguri(2008), Secretary, Lava Hotel Association (2008).

The overall percentage growth rate of eco tourist inflow from 2001 to 2008 was 56.81% in North Bengal. Table 1 also reflects that the percentage growth rate of tourist inflow from 2001 to 08 was 177.19% for Lata guri, which is the highest growth rate among all the peripheral areas. This tiny hamlet lies in the lap of Gorumara National Park. This accelerating growth rate of nature tourism activity is not seen to other nature tourism destinations of North Bengal. It has taken only eight years to reach such a growth rate. However, Kulik ranks second in the percentage growth rate of tourist inflow i.e, 47.69%.

The growth rate of Kunjanagar is 45.24% while it is 14.09% for Lava. The growth rate of Mongpong is only 5.61%. From this tourist trend it is clear that Lataguri has been very popular nature tourism centre among all the peripheral nature tourism centres. Other peripheral areas are growing slowly in comparison to Lata guri. There are a number of factors, which have accelerated this speedy growth of nature tourism at Lataguri. These are-

- Rich bio diversity of the Gorumara National Park
- Lata guri Nature Interpretation Centre

- Ethnic villages such as Saraswati forest village, Budhram forest village, Bichabhanga forest village, Chatua forest village, Kalipur forest village and Murti forest village.
- Coordination between the forest department and the private entrepreneurs
- Involvement of local people in tourism activities such as accommodation, transport, cooking, tourist guides, folk dancing and souvenir industry

The author conducted a schedule survey in December 2008. The survey was administered randomly to 150 respondents at Lata guri, Kunjnagar, Rasikbeel, Mongpong and Kulik. Field observations show that 80% of the tourists are Bengalee and they come from West Bengal. They occupy the lion's share of the total tourists. About 12% of the tourists come from different states of our country such as Bihar, Assam, Orissa and others. The rest 8% belongs to those tourists who come from different countries of the world i.e. U.K., U.S.A., Australia, Germany, Canada, Japan, Netherland, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, France, Denmark, New Zealand etc. However, no Kashmiri, Urdu tourists were recorded. The Khasi, Mizo, Manipuri, Naga, Garo etc. tourists were also absent during the survey.

The survey also reflects that 70% of the tourists come in the peripheral areas independently while the rest 30% come on packaged tour.

IMPACT OF NATURE TOURISM ON THE PERIPHERAL AREAS

Nature tourism plays an important role in the economy of the peripheral areas of North Bengal. This can be best understood by the following economic impact of nature tourism-

Nature Tourism As a Revenue Earner and Multiplier Effect :

Christaller(1963) argued that tourism can be a means of obtaining economic development in peripheral regions with rich tourists traveling from the metropolitan centre to the periphery, bringing foreign exchange and creating jobs. In fact, tourism offers the opportunity for a redistribution of income and employment to regions that are traditionally peripheral to the mainstream of economic life (Ryan, 2006). However the flow of money generated by the tourists in the peripheral areas filters through the economy stimulating various sectors i.e, accommodation, cuisine, transportation and entertainments etc. Local people are actively engaged in these sectors and the money spent by the tourists goes to the local business in a number of ways. This money in turn is spent on salaries and on meeting the demands of the tourists such as food, drink, entertainment etc. Each time tourist makes expenditure, a ripple of additional spending is sent through the economy. This ripple is called a multiplier (Smith,1983). Thus 'the expenditure incurred by the tourists supports not only the tourist industry directly but indirectly also supports a number of other related activities which produce goods and services for the tourist industry' (Singh, 1989:263).

To have a glimpse of revenue generation from nature tourism field surveys were conducted by the author in major nature tourism destinations such as Lata guri, Kunjnagar, Rasikbeel and Mongpong of North Bengal during the period of October, November and December, 2008. The following outcomes have been gathered from these field surveys--

Table 2: Tourism Revenue Generation of Selected Peripheral Areas in North Bengal

Year	Kunjanagar (In US \$)	Rasikbeel (In US \$)	Lataguri (In US \$)	Mongpong (In US \$)
2002-03	16920	12400	20400	17120
2003-04	20800	5440	32620	18460
2004-05	21000	3780	47500	20460
2005-06	25000	4600	57160	19960
2006-07	21000	8240	60780	20640
2007-08	21440	9920	65960	20920

Sources: Treasurer, Resort Owners' Association, Lataguri 2008, Kunjnagar Eco-Development Committee (2008), Divisional Forest officer (Cooch behar 2008), Centre In-Charge, Mongpong Nature Centre(2008).

From table 2 it is seen that the peripheral areas are getting a huge amount of financial benefits from the entry fees to the parks, accommodation, transport, tourist guides, folk artists and handicrafts (Souvenir industry) in different years. Among the peripheral areas Lataguri earned an amount of US \$ 65960 during the period of 2007-08. This tourist destination received the highest income generation. Kunjanagar ranked second i.e, US \$

21440 in the same period. There is a committee to manage and run the Kunjnagar Ecotourism Park. The committee has 458 members and each family comprises of more or less 5-7 members. This committee shares 25% of the total income of the nature tourism Park. The Committee takes an important role for the development of nature tourism in the area.

The revenue generation of Rasikbeel is comparatively less. This peripheral destination earned US \$ 9920 in this period. However, in spite of minor fluctuations there is an accelerating rate of income generation from the nature tourism activity of the peripheral areas. This accelerating rate reflects the increasing popularity of the nature tourism activity of the peripheral areas. The earnings of such revenue would not be possible unless nature tourism is flourished in the area.

Employment Generation: Tourism employment can be described as the combination of all direct, indirect and induced employment, in both the formal and informal sectors, resulting from the tourism industry(Sharpley & Telfer 2006). Nature tourism generates employment in various sectors of the economy. In fact nature

tourism is a highly labour intensive industry and thus is an efficient way to generate employment in the peripheral areas of North Bengal. In North Bengal ‘most natural areas are located in rural locales. The development of tourism in such areas can have considerable impact on the local people’ (Aparna et al. 2007:236). However the spread of nature tourism activity has opened a new source of livelihood to many ethnic people encircling the Gorumara National Park. The Park authority has employed these ethnic people as tourist guides and folk dancers (Table 3). A live show of the ethnic tribal dance can be seen every evening in all the nature tourism camps at Lata guri, Murti, Dhupjhora, Kalipur and Budhram Forest Village. However, they are also encouraged to engage in souvenir industry. In this way, the park authority to some extent has been succeeded to provide employment generation amongst the local people.

Table 3: Employment Generation at Lataguri After 2000

Sources	Before 2000	2007 - 08	Percentage of employment
Accommodation Sector	Nil	300 persons	62.37%
Transport Sector	Nil	70 ,,	14.55%
Souvenir Industry	Nil	20 ,,	4.16%
Employment as Guide	Nil	35 ,,	7.28%
Members engaged in Folk dancing	Nil	56 ,,	11.64%
Total		481	100

Source: Author's Field Survey (2008)

The field survey carried out in December, 2008 at Lataguri, the most rich peripheral nature tourism destination reveals that the area has benefited much from the employment point of view. Due to expansion of nature tourism activity the area generates employment opportunities to the local people. At present 481 people are directly employed by this tourism activity. Of the total employment, 62.37% has been engaged in accommodation sector. Thus this sector generates maximum employment opportunities. Transport sector employs 14.55% while the percentage of members engaged in folk dancing is 11.64. Souvenir industry employs less number of people i.e, 4.16%. Table 3 shows the employment scenario in different sectors generated by nature tourism after 2000 in the area.

Development of Infrastructure :

Porter(1998) suggests that the building of a tourism cluster in developing economies can be a positive force in improving outlying infrastructure and dispersing economic activity (Sharpley & Telfer,2006). The construction and provision of roads, resorts, guest houses, cottages, electricity and gas supplies, sanitation, water supply etc. have been undertaken by the government of West Bengal in some peripheral nature tourism destinations of North Bengal to attract and facilitate tourists from outside.

Lata guri, Murti- Dhupjhora, Kalipur, Kunajnagar, Rasikbeel, Mongpong, Kulik and Lava are such tourism areas where West Bengal forest department has provided infrastructural facilities like construction of roads, ethnic tourist lodges, provision of electricity, drinking water etc. These infrastructural changes also benefit the residents of the region. Besides, the development of infrastructure has formed the basis for diversification of other economic activities such as small-scale industries, horticulture, and means of communication etc. Thus, the tourist development directly or indirectly acts as an effective means for revival of infrastructure and regional development.

From the field survey carried out by the author in December, 2008 it is seen that there has been a radical change in infrastructural development after 2000 at Lataguri. For instance in 2007- 08 the number of resorts in the area was 30 whereas there was no resort before 2000 (Table 4). Of these, the local people own 60% resorts while the rest 40% belong to outsiders. However, the movement of small vehicles suitable for jungle safari has also been increased. There are 54 vehicles in the area now and these are mostly owned and run by the local people. The number of telephone booths is at present 10 while there was no telephone booth before 2000.

Table 4 : Infrastructural Development at Lataguri After 2000

Sources	Before 2000	2007 - 08
Tourist Resort	Nil	30
Hotel	2	5
Transport (Maruti / Sumo etc)	1	54
Telephone Booth	Nil	10
Handicrafts Sales Centre	Nil	1

Source : Author's Field Survey (2008)

Problems of the Nature Tourism Activity :

The rapid growth rate of nature tourism activity at Lataguri is inviting some negative impacts on the environment. Wall(1994) notes that ecotourism attracts attention to natural treasures, thereby increasing the pressures upon them (Newsome et al 2006). Thus, increasing construction of resorts is causing loss to a number of plants. According to Lataguri Gram Panchayet, a local governing body about 10 acres of forest lands have been wiped out for the construction of the resorts and other infrastructural facilities in the area since 2000. In fact heavy human use of open space adversely affects the biomass (Singh, 1989). Again the increasing use of wood as fuel and timber in a number of industrial products such as souvenir industry also leads to felling and cutting of trees.

Again the lack of co-ordination between forest department and tourism department impedes the free flow of both Indian and foreign tourists in the area. Bookings for accommodation in some nature tourism destinations (except Lataguri, Gorumara

National Park) are a difficult task, which discourage the tourists to come here.

However, lack of a systematic separate tourism organization is another constraint of tourism activity in the study area. New directions (paradigms) that are emerging in the tourism field suggest that the efficiency and effectiveness of tourism planning comprises not only advances in tourism planning theory and practices but also improvement in the organizational framework within which decisions are designed and put into practice (Costa 2001). Hence there should have a separate tourism Organization for North Bengal which will constantly monitor the nature tourism activity of the area.

Recommendations:

For the sustainable development of nature tourism activity at the peripheral areas the increasing construction of resorts should be restricted. Proper flexible measures have to be carried out for bookings of accommodation. Sudden cancellation of the bookings of forest resorts and guesthouses for the arrival of the ministers or forest officials has to be avoided. Again, the co-ordination between the forest department and tourism department should be maintained since most of the tourist destinations of the area are forest based. Apart from these, emphasis should be given on the proper tourist advertisement and publicity programmes. In this case private tourism enterprises can play an important role. Thus 'with regard to product development, tourism marketers should pay particular attention to the important relationship between marketing and tourism planning' (Cooper et al, 2006:94). The task of a planner does not end when a plan has been prepared for three years, five years or seven years. A system of constant revision and monitoring of the plan progress should be a part of the exercise of the planning (Bhatia 1985). Targets must be revised at times in the light of changing resources, conditions and circumstances.

The planning approach should also include physical, social, economic and environmental elements as interrelated and interdependent components in the development process of the peripheral areas. In fact nature based tourism in peripheral areas needs to be seen within the context of the wider regional development objectives and management strategies of the areas in which such tourism development occurs (Hall & Boyd et al. 2006).

Major Findings:

The present study provides an overview of nature tourism activity of different peripheral areas of North Bengal. It also reflects a partial analysis of the economic benefits that nature tourism projects of the peripheral areas contribute to some local areas as well as providing some baseline assessment of its impact on social and resource development of North Bengal. The fundamental findings are that nature tourism has improved the economic opportunities of local people and other stakeholders through income and employment generation in the peripheral areas of North Bengal mainly

communities near National parks. Several options are mapped out for North Bengal to increase its economic contribution to the peripheral areas, broaden entrepreneurial base and achieve some economies of scale in its tourism operation.

Conclusion:

Nature tourism has greater relevance to the societies of the peripheral areas. It can generate employment opportunities, encourage small scale industries and promote regional growth impulses. This tourism activity has been constructed to act as growth poles to help stimulate regional development in different parts of the world. Therefore proper planning should be adopted to develop this tourism activity in the peripheral areas of North Bengal.

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