

Evolving Pilgrimage Tourism in Bakreswar, West Bengal: A Way to Sustainable Rural Society

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Abstract: *Development of tourism is one of the solutions to reduce poverty in the rural areas. Pilgrimage tourism has huge potential in West Bengal. The largest number of Shakti Pithas are located in Birbhum; one among them is Bakreswar. This study adopting a descriptive approach highlights the challenges and strategizes measures for tourism development in Bakreswar. Hundred respondents were interviewed randomly based on interview schedules during March-April 2023. The profiles of the respondents were shown by univariate distribution. To find out the association between development of rural economy and standard of living chi-square statistic was conducted. Also, SWOT analysis aided in strategizing the plan for development of tourism in the region. The results show that there is a significant relationship between development of infrastructure and increase in the number of visitors in Bakreswar. Furthermore, the respondents reported a positive impact of tourism on the local economy. Sufficient government planning, policies and regulations, satisfactory understanding, expertise of tour operators, broader issues of eradicating overall apathy are some common ways that can boost the local economy.*

Keywords: Birbhum, infrastructure, livelihood, management, Shakti Pithas

1. Introduction

India's massive geographic extent, cultural and artistic diversity offers enormous opportunities for the travel and tourism industry (Arunmozhi, & Panneerselvam, 2013; Venkatesh & Raj, 2016). India has a rich tradition of prosperous villages nurturing a huge base of population. It is in the rural space that one can experience various agricultural practices, handicrafts, folklores, the heritage, culture and soul of the country. Promoting local culture through tourism stimulates exchange of ideas and creation of jobs. Rural tourism may play a vital role in bridging the gap between rural and urban India by balancing urbanization and counter urbanization syndromes (Ray et al., 2012). It is apparent that each site develops for its unique characteristic. For example; Puri in Odisha developed as a tourist destination for scenic beauty of the beach and Lord Jagannath (Mishra, 2020) while

some developed based on forest community (Sam et al., 2014). Pilgrimage tourism has huge potential apart from growing ecotourism, adventure tourism and cultural tourism (Venkatesh & Rao, 2016). Among the 51 *Shakti Pithas* in India, about 15 are in West Bengal (Singh, 2012). Birbhum houses the most number of *Shakti Pithas* in the state at Bakreswar, Kankalitala, Sainthia, Nalhati and Tarapith (Majumdar, 2006). Bakreshwar is a village in Dubrajpur C.D. Block in Suri Sadar subdivision of Birbhum district in West Bengal (Fig 1). Bakrewar and its neighbourhood offers an excellent amalgamation of geographical and cultural sites. Many hot springs, which are part of eastern continuity of Son-Narmada lineament of varying temperature are also found here (Barman, 2013). Hot springs are believed to have a high sulphur content which is a natural cure for many skin diseases. This study attempts to highlight the importance of pilgrimage tourism and see whether the development of tourism will impact the economy of Bakreswar.

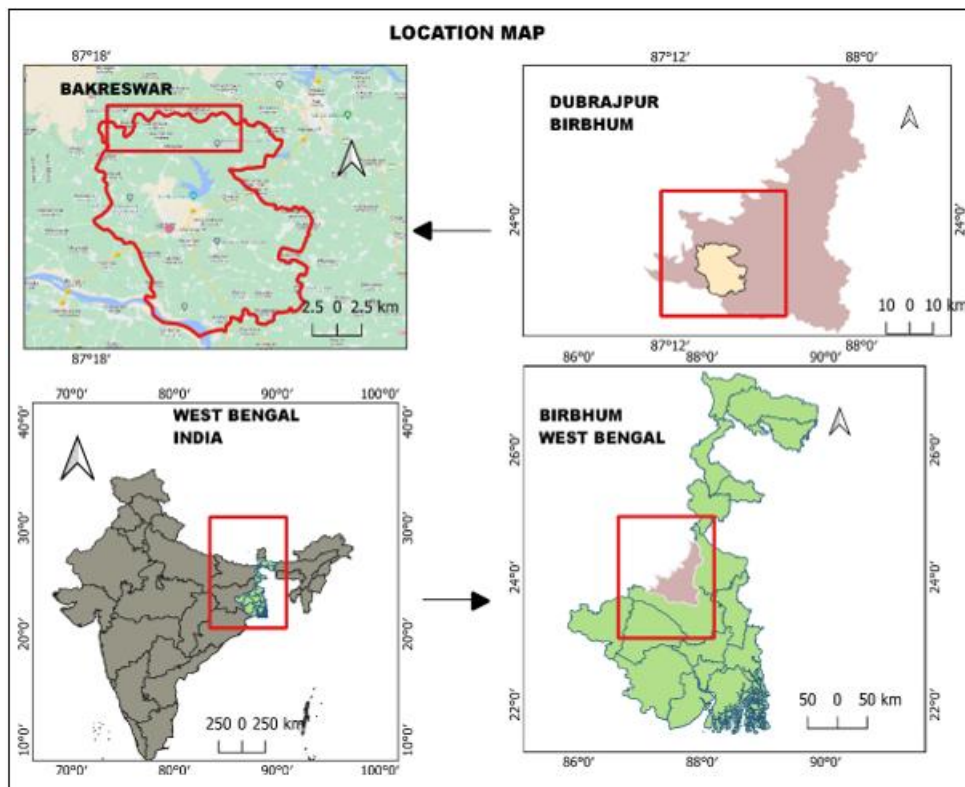


Figure 1: Location of Bakreswar, West Bengal

2. Methodology

Primary study becomes pivotal in understanding the perception and opinion of the respondents on the various challenges and unexplored opportunities of the place. The respondents included households (both directly and indirectly involved in tourism), hoteliers, and shopkeepers operating at the market nodes. A total of 100 samples were selected randomly to avoid any unwanted biases. To get an estimate on the effect of tourism on livelihood, sample sizes were divided into 45 households, 30 shops and 15 hotels.

Semi-structured questionnaires were prepared and a face-to-face interview schedule was designed. This paper is mainly based on the primary study conducted between March and April 2023, which facilitated understanding the perception and attitudes of respondents.

The variables of the study contain dependent variables like number of tourists and independent variables- infrastructure development and standard of living. The following two hypotheses could possibly explain the relationship between infrastructure development and tourism and subsequent development of standard of living of the people.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Infrastructure development plays an important role in tourism development of a place.

There were studies which found out that infrastructure development was important to develop tourism. For example, increase in the number of rooms was an important determinant of the developing tourism sector (Jovanovic & Ilac, 2016; Lovelock & Lovelock, 2013). The lack of infrastructures were drawbacks that can really affect the experience and pleasure of the tourists (Smith, 1994). Therefore, improving the infrastructure in tourism can drive

significant growth of the local economy (Shivaraju & Kumar, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2000). Tourism has improved the communication, transportation, sanitation, standard of living of rural people and created golden opportunities for socio-economic development of local communities (Horaira, 2020; Ray et al., 2012). This imparts aid to the hypothesis (H2) to validate the relationship between standard of living and development of tourism.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The standard of living develops with the development of tourism.

Development of tourism is one of the solutions to reduce poverty by generating income, earning foreign exchange and sustainable development (Bunghez, 2016; Mishra & Rout, 2012). One of the important roles of tourism is to assimilate different cultures and influence the social matrix of the place. The constant mental and physical mobility of the travelers impact the local economy and lifestyle.

There had been studies which suggested that socio-economic characteristics of the people who were involved in tourism was significantly different with those who were not involved. (Marzuki, 2011; Mohammadi et al., 2010; Nayomi & Gnanapala, 2015; Sawant, 2016; Singla, 2014). The local community and stakeholders were not always involved in the planning and development process of tourism and mostly do not receive sufficient financial benefits from tourism development (Adebayo et al., 2014; Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016). Apart from a few instances, in most of the cases the perception of the effect of tourism on socio-economic development was positive (Mensah, 2012).

In this paper an attempt has been made to see whether tourism can be an alternative sustainable livelihood to the agriculturally poor region? It highlighted the relationship between tourism and economic status of the respondents.

Further, it outlined the challenges perceived by the respondents for development of tourism and provided probable management strategies that can develop tourism in the area.

The profiles of the respondents were shown by univariate distribution. To find out the association between development of rural economy and standard of living chi-square statistic was conducted. Chi square test is a statistical test commonly used to compare observed data with data that is expected to obtain according to a specific hypothesis.

Also, to supplement quantitative information open ended questions were asked on perception on potential of tourism development in the region, challenges for development of tourism and opinion of the respondents on ways to develop tourism in the region. Some of the responses were difficult to quantify and hence they had been recorded and presented in the text as quoted statements.

3. Results

3.1 Perception of the respondents on the infrastructure available at Bakreswar

Infrastructure and amenities are the key ingredients to develop a tourism hotspot. Infrastructure includes access to roads, railway, adequate water supply, sewerage facilities, electricity, and accommodation (Jovanovic & Ilac, 2016). On the other hand amenities include parking facilities, public toilets, food joints, primary health facilities, pharmacies, benches etc. The respondents were asked about their opinion on status and availability of physical infrastructures like condition of roads, nearby railway stations, number of hotels and lodges and other services like ATM, parking etc. Since the responses indicated overall dissatisfaction about the infrastructure the distribution was less relevant and was not given in this paper. A significant majority expressed their discontentment related to the role of government in developing tourism in the area. They were also found to report their dissatisfaction about lack of railway connectivity and narrow roads around the area. In the words of one of the respondents "The road connecting Bakreswar with Suri is reportedly one-lane and smooth movement of traffic is a concern". Almost everybody said that there is a lack of adequate food joints and lodging in the region.

The chi-square test was carried on between increase in number of visitors and development of infrastructure therefore the following hypothesis was outlined;

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Infrastructure development plays an important role in tourism development of a place.

It is said that when p value is lesser than commonly accepted level of either 0.05 or 0.01 null hypothesis can be rejected and alternative hypothesis can be accepted and vice-versa. The p value is $p < 0.001$ which is lesser than the accepted value of 0.01 or 0.05 (Table 1). Hence it can be substantiated that there is a significant relationship between development of infrastructure and increase in the number of visitors in Bakreswar.

Table 1: Association between development of infrastructure and increase in number of tourists, Bakreswar, West Bengal, 2023

		Positive response for Increase in Number of customers (in %)	Total (N)	Chi-square
Improvement in infrastructure	Yes	100	15	0
	No	10.7	28	
	Total		43	

Source: Computed by authors. Note: Respondents included both hoteliers and shopkeeper together. The numbers may not match total respondents as some had not given response.

3.2 Effect of tourism on economy of the place

Tourism is considered as an important service sector of the economy. If nurtured well it has the potential of a profitable source of non-farm activities especially in the areas where agriculture is poor and people are devoid of any alternative source of livelihood. It has often been seen that the effect of tourism on the local economy is negative as income of the local population does not increase fairly.

The respondents who were directly involved with tourism like the hoteliers were probed on the issues of their income, any other sources of income and how they perceive the future of tourism in the area. The results show (Table 2) that six out of ten respondents reported that earnings from hotels were their only source of income. Although, there is a non-negligible proportion of respondents who indicated that they also have other sources of income. According to the second group of respondents, divergence of income is necessary as tourism only thrives for a few months of the year. About six of ten respondents believed that tourism is the main source of the region and its affecting the economy in a positive way. The rest four were the ones who reported that tourism is not adequately developed and the effect on the economy is not significant.

About 30 shopkeepers were surveyed for their opinion on the potentiality of tourism, role of tourism on economic development and steps that can be taken to improve tourism. The shops were mostly miscellaneous in nature and could not be categorized for selling any specific item. The items mostly found to be sold in all the shops surveyed were brass and copper products, conch products, portraits of various Hindu deities, miniature models of *Shiva*, souvenirs like key chain, locket, deities engraved in wooden pieces and wooden wall hangings. Some shops also sold sarees, towels, artificial jewelries and modest cosmetics. However, among all the products the shopkeeper reported, the demand was usually high for portraits and items essential for offering to deities followed by brass souvenirs and handicrafts.

The shops mostly open early in the morning and the market remains open till 8 p.m. in the evening. The shopkeepers usually get customers through word of mouth as the markets were next to the hotels. The visitors who put up in the hotels automatically had access to the market. The presence of them in social media and the internet is non-existent. The results show that seven out of ten shopkeepers had only one source of income, one-fifth had two sources and a negligible proportion had more than two sources of income respectively.

The shopkeepers were asked ‘Whether tourism has any impact on the local economy?’ and about three-fifths of them replied in positive. However, 80 per cent of them think that the flow of visitors to the temple town has been stagnant over the years (Table 2).

Based on these findings it is apparent to consider the effect of tourism on income of the respondents. The variable of annual income was not very reliable as there lies a chance of under representation. Therefore, in this study standard of living was used as a proxy to household income as they were strongly associated. The variable ‘Increase in number of tourists’ was

used as an indicator of tourism development. Therefore the following hypothesis is expressed as:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The standard of living improves with the development of tourism.

Table 3 shows the chi-square results between increase in number of tourists and standard of living respectively. The result of this test was statistically significant (*p* value being 0.010) and helped to accept the alternative hypothesis H2. This confirms an association between increase in the number of tourists and improvement of standard of living.

Table 2: Perception of hoteliers and shopkeepers on effect of tourism on their income and livelihood, Bakreswar, West Bengal, 2023

Perceptions		Hoteliers		Shopkeepers in market	
		%	N	%	N
How many source of income	One	57.1	8	70.0	21
	Two	35.7	5	23.3	7
	More than two	7.1	1	6.7	2
Has standard of living increased	Yes	35.7	5	37.9	11
	No	64.3	9	62.1	18
Is tourism improving local economy	Yes	64.3	9	63.3	19
	No	33.3	6	36.6	11
Increase of visitors in recent years	Yes	42.9	29	41.4	12
	No	57.1	14	58.6	17
Things in demand shop	Brass item/handicraft/clothes	-	-	43.3	13
	Conch products	-	-	13.3	4
	Portrait/Pooja materials	-	-	43.3	13

Source: Primary survey.

Table 3: Association between standard of living and increase in number of tourists, Bakreswar, West Bengal, 2023

	Value	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.570a	0.01	0.007
N	43		

Source: Computed by authors. Note: Respondents included both hoteliers and shopkeepers together. The numbers may not match total respondents as some had not given response

4. Discussions

The reported income of the respondents were found to be distinctively low. Though income can often be under-reported, a chance of low level of livelihood can be assumed here. This can be substantiated from the findings which indicated low income of the region (Ghosh et al., 2022). Within the caste category Brahmins were occupied as priests in the temples. The rest of the population were largely associated with hotels, food joints and modest shops catering to the needs of the tourists. It is conspicuous that people attached to agriculture were negligible. This can be corroborated from other studies on Birbhum which highlights the problem of livelihood in the region (Ghosh et al., 2022, Mondal et al., 2018). Agriculture is mostly poor in the region and non-availability of any other source of income pushes people to a state of poverty (Halder et al., 2018). Overall, the results show that respondents believed to have reported a positive impact of tourism on the local economy though the flow of visitors has not increased. This can be substantiated

from other studies which had also found positive correlation of tourism and economy (Horaira, 2020; Mensah, 2012; Shivaraju & Kumar, 2015)

The suggestion put forward by respondents for better infrastructure can be broadly classified under two broad heads. Firstly, lack of physical connectivity to Bakreswar from any main railway stations like Howrah, Kolkata and Sealdah is a big setback for the area. The road connecting Bakreswar to the nearest towns like Suri and Dubrajpur is also narrow. A double lane road can provide a boost to promote tourist flow in the region. A provision of rail stop or halt can address this issue. Secondly, provision for sanitation facilities like public toilets, potable water can be made by the local government. This can be corroborated from the findings of Venkatesh & Raj, 2016 where challenges listed to the development of tourism were lack of physical infrastructure, lack of amenities and connectivity. The participation and coordination of all concerned bodies, stakeholders should be very imperative in supporting and expansion of infrastructures (Kidane & Berhe, 2017). The shopkeepers and hoteliers also gave similar suggestions. One of the shopkeepers intriguingly suggested “Beautify a pond for boating activity so that natural resources can be used as recreation spots”.

The findings are presented below in a tabular format for formulating measures for developing tourism in the area. Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat (SWOT) model is often used as a tool for strategic development of a phenomenon (Gierszewska and Puchiato, 2010).

Table 4: Factors associated with the development of tourism in Bakreswar, 2023

Strength	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The place has immense religious significance • The exclusivity of geological feature of the place • This place was found to be absolutely safe for visiting with families. • The openness of culture may attract a large number of diverse tourists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of physical infrastructure and amenities • Seasonality of tourism • Lack of government initiative
Threats	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already prosperous <i>Shakti Pithas</i> may attract more tourist • The unprotected use of hot springs results in pollution and makes the ecology vulnerable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of pilgrimage as a uniting force: • Promotion of Local handicraft like metal (<i>Dokra</i>) can revive tourism • Community Based Tourism based on special elements of local life, culture and nature is useful • Using social media and internet local tourist operators can aim to promote tourism.

Source: Prepared by author

5. Conclusions

This paper highlighted the importance of boosting and reviving pilgrimage tourism in Bakreswar. The place has a distinctive mix of spiritual and mythological elements which is a fundamental part of our social existence in India. This stimulates people with a curious mind to explore the marriage between history and myths. It is also our responsibility to see that economic benefits from tourism should be achieved keeping in mind the sustainable use of cultural and physical resources. Hence, it can be expected that with suitable leveraging of cultural heritage of the region development of Bakreswar is possible.

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