Heritage Tourism – A Development Panacea in Rural Areas? The Case of Bishnupur Heritage Sites

Asmita Basu Chatterjee

1. Army Institute of Management, Plot No III /B-11, Action Area III, Newtown, Kolkata West Bengal – 700 160, India (Email: asmita.basu2011@gmail.com)

Received: 11 August 2020; Revised: 14 September 2020; Accepted: 08 October 2020

Abstract: The key factors which predominate the conventional type of tourism plans as well the tourism industry are none other than economic growth and commercialization. The regular tourism schemes built on the basic objective of leisure are now being replaced by different motives such as experiencing the heritage and cultural aspects of a particular region or community. This has led to the popularity of Heritage tourism and cultural tourism over conventional tourism amidst the tourists all over the world. In order to sustain the heritage sites and various unique and indigenous cultural traits of different regions, sustainability should also be considered as a vital element. So sustainable heritage tourism plans should focus on a wider and more holistic, regional analysis. The present study aims to highlight the factors to be considered for developing sustainable tourism specifically in the heritage sites through a case study of the temple sites in the Bishnupur district in West Bengal. Culturally rich and studded with several architectural and heritage gems, Bishnupur, a significant temple town in Eastern India, has been an important area of study. The present research paper discusses the importance of Bishnupur as a centre of sustainable heritage tourism, the formulation of strategies, the reasons behind the strategies, their main features and how they can best be produced.

Keywords: Heritage, Tourism, Development, Bishnupur, Policy, Practice, Sustainability

Introduction
Tourism has been considered as an essential stimulant for the socio-economic growth, revival and conservation of the rural regions. (Sharpley, 2002). The rural environment is very delicate in nature. It can be easily changed or damaged by external factors causing rapid changes and tourism can be a powerful agent for such a change. Such detrimental effects are of immense concern because the rural areas serve as potential natural and historical heritage reserves. It also holds equal significance from commercial point of view.

The word Heritage, has become a ‘buzz’ since 1990s (Palmer, 1999). It is in fact regarded as one of the most significant and fastest growing elements of tourism (Alzua, O’Leary, & Morrison, 1998), (Herbert, 1995). Nowadays heritage is referred to as something which requires being managed (Cheung, 1999) and uniquely marketed
(Bennett, 1995). It is indeed a fact that heritage attractions are irreplaceable resources for the tourism industry.

The debates and discussions over the two burning issues pertaining to development namely the desire for economic progress and the need of conserving the environment led to the conceptualization of sustainable development (Bramwell & Lane, 1993). In order to confront the threats of unmanaged tourism the concept of sustainable tourism has emerged through the discussions and research over the last few decades. The figure (Figure 1) denotes the relationship among the elements of tourism. As a matter of fact sustainable tourism identifies tourism within heritage destinations and it can be portrayed by a triangular relationship among the hosts located in heritage regions, holidaymakers, and the tourism industry.

![Figure 1: Relationship among the elements of tourism](image)

It has been observed that the tourism industry primarily dominated the triangle in the past. The holiday makers have been seen to be strongly connected to motivation, attraction at the holiday destination, use of different types of media, and the general characteristics of touristic area. It may be observed that tourist destinations function as units at different geographical levels, without having any definite geographical boundary. The content of the destination consists of a dynamic assemblage of tourist attractions, culture, landscapes, events, services and the people of the host area. The tourism industry consists of the service providers for different facilities. Accommodation and logistics services are provided by Government and private agencies. Tour operators have been functional in different destinations for facilitating mass tourism. In the present scenario the trend follows flexibilization of the tourist product which is done by way of customization, despite the demands of tour operators who still advocate and advertise packages of mass tourism (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). In order to reconcile the tensions between the three factors in the triangle (Figure 1), and to maintain the equilibrium in the long term, sustainable tourism comes into play.
Literature Review

The main objective of Sustainable tourism is to minimise the damage on environment and cultural objects, optimise visitor satisfaction, and maximise the economic growth of the region which can be sustained in the long-term (Lane, 1994). The social and cultural aspects of a destination are very critical in attracting tourists and augmenting the significance of the destination. A destination may be an economic dwarf or bounded by political hindrances, yet it can be one of the most visited places (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). The socio cultural competitiveness plays a very vital role in developing sustainable tourism strategies. To sustain the longevity of a particular destination it is important to respond to market demand and address the competitive challenges. Sustainability of a destination in present scenario is critical for future destination development plans which should be compatible with market needs and environment integrity so that economic viability can be maintained (Hassan, 2000). Hunter suggested that the concept of sustainable tourism should be redefined in order to incorporate a range of approaches to the tourism/environment system within destination areas (Hunter, 1997). Any country can increase its development potential by harnessing its natural and cultural resources without, at the same time, destroying them. It is to be noted that without proper understanding of underlying factors, careful planning and management, rural tourism may usher in unsustainable elements (Cater, 1993).

In order to make the concept of sustainability in rural tourism a success, it must be a multi-faceted framework. A practical way forward lies in the creation of Sustainable Management and Development Strategies (Lane, 1994). In the present scenario sustainable development has become an important challenge to deal with particularly in the age of modernization.

Indian tourism, despite of its immense potential, has witnessed slow development, and shortcomings. A comprehensive and strategic approach is required to cater to the training and education needs of Indian tourism at various levels for the major target groups particularly in the rural areas (Jithendran & Baum, 2000).

Heritage Tourism in Bishnupur: From Policy to Practice

Bishnupur is a city of temples located in the district of Bankura (Figure 2), West Bengal. Bishnupur was once the ancient capital of Malla Dynasty (16th century A.D.). The name has been derived from the name of Lord Vishnu since a large section of people belongs to the ‘Vaishnava’ sect. Modern town of Bishnupur has new faces representing urbanization but its temples and religious fervor still dominate the town’s psyche and recall its former status as a royal city. Historians say that 1000 places of worship existed throughout the entire town in the nineteenth century and even today we can see hundreds of them spread across in the different parts of the town, some beautifully preserved while the others in a dilapidated state. Additionally the historians have specified that about nothing less than thirty of such shrines and temples belong to the seventeenth-eighteenth century constructed by the Mallabhum kings who were the
patrons of such magnificent Hindu temples housing metal images of Krishna and other deities of Vaishnavite order (Ring, Watson, & Schellinger, 1996). The unique terracotta temples that we find in Bishnupur follow the traditional Bengal style temple architecture. The basic structure is similar to that of a village hut with one or more chalas (roof) which resemble a typical Bengal folk hut (Nanda, 2005).

Out of the several architectural gems, some of the magnificent temples are – Jor Bangla temple, Shyam Rai temple, the Rasa-mancha and Malleswar temple.

**Jor Bangla Temple:** The twin hut shaped temple structure built of carved bricks represents typical Bengal type of folk architecture, joined together by a small tower on the top (Figure 3). This terracotta temple is intensely carved with terracotta plaques depicting various scenes from the Puranas, epics, Krishnalila etc. It also consists of different scenes and episodes from contemporary life. It is considered as one of the best carved temple highlighting the historic heritage of Bishnupur (ASI Kolkata Circle.). It may be dated back to AD 1734-35 (Biswas, 1992, p. 15).

**Shyam Rai Temple:** This brick-built demonstrates the accomplishments of higher order. It is a Pancha-ratna temple being situated within the fort and consisting Pancha ratnas i.e., five towers (Figure 4). The central tower itself is octagonal surrounded by an octagonal corridor. The main facade of the temple comprises of narrative panel
drawn from Ramayana and Krishnalila stories. It is thus most celebrated for its intricate terracotta ornamentations and the structural marvel. It is evident from the inscriptive records that King Raghunatha Singha had constructed this temple in AD 1643 (Biswas, 1992, pp. 22-24).

Figure 3: Jor Bangla Temple

Figure 4: Shyamrai Temple
Figure 5: Rasmancha

Figure 6: Malleswar Temple
**Rasa-Mancha:** Built on a laterite plinth, it is one of the earliest structures at Bishnupur. Rasa mancha is an impressive square building formation with a small shrine in the centre. There are three-corridor galleries and vaulted roofs enclosing the central shrine (Figure 5). During Rasa festival this structure is used for putting up idols from the nearby temples to carry out the rituals and festivities. It was built by Bir Hambir in AD 1600 (Biswas, 1992, p. 9).

**Malleswar Temple:** This temple is considered to be one of the earliest temples of Bishnupur, built in the year AD 1622 by King Raghunatha Singha. It is among the deul type of temples with a square plan (Figure 6). The original temple had a rekha shikhara which at a later period was replaced an octagonal shaped tower (Biswas, 1992, p. 13).

**Heritage Tourism and Rural Development in Bishnupur**

To understand the nature and purpose of visit of the tourists in Bishnupur, a survey was conducted at some of the well-known heritage sites such as Jor Bangla temple, Shyam Rai temple, Rasa-mancha and the Malleswar temple. Sample size of 60 tourists was considered for this short survey during a weekend. Bishnupur being located only 140 kms from Kolkata, it is one of the popular weekend destinations. Bishnupur is also well connected by road and railways with other districts in West Bengal and hence people often choose to spend the weekend amidst the heritage and cultural environment.

**Figure 7:** Distribution of respondents (tourists) at different heritage sites in Bishnupur

**Observations**

All the four chosen sites of survey are protected and maintained by Archaeological Survey of India (Kolkata circle). It may be noted from Figure 7, that majority of the respondents were located at the Jor Bangla temple, followed by Rasa-mancha, Shyam
Rai and very few were found at Malleswar temple. During the survey it was also evident that most of the tourists were unaware of Malleswar temple, although it is one of the oldest temples in Bishnupur. From Figure 8 & Figure 9, it is quite clear that the primary reason for the tourists to visit Bishnupur is not just spending time with family but experiencing the history, culture and heritage of Bishnupur. Thus from the survey it has been observed that majority of the tourists now a days are more attracted towards heritage spots. Instead of choosing the conventional leisure trips, tourists are more inclined towards gaining knowledge and experiencing the heritage and culture of the destination (Figure 10).

Figure 8: Primary reason for visiting Bishnupur

Figure 9: Other purpose of visit
To actually consider Heritage tourism as a panacea for the rural development we may further delve into the inner strengths and opportunities of this region and minimizing the weaknesses and threats which lie in its way ahead.

By analyzing the SWOT matrix (Figure 11) we can get an idea about the strengths and weaknesses of this region particularly of the temple sites chosen for this study. This analysis is conducted at the preliminary stage which helps to develop the strategic plan and competitive advantages for the heritage sites specifically chosen for this study.
Furthermore, the information obtained on the opportunities that are available, will help us to take adequate measures and construct a sustainable framework. This framework is not only meant for the sustainability of the temples but also the surrounding region and more importantly the people residing in that region. Since these villages are remotely located the transportation and communication networks are not well developed. People specially the tourists are hardly aware of such archaeological gems located in this region like the Malleswar temple due to lack of promotion and awareness. The SWOT analysis (Figure 11) also indicates the requirement of collecting the information regarding the two prospective areas - industrial development and tourism.

![Figure 12: Diagram showing the Cultural elements before conducting heritage tourism activities](image)

The impact of heritage tourism activities can induce five categories of change of cultural element particularly the tangible elements (Figures 12 and 13).

- **Addition** - The process of adding something new to the current object in order to fulfill some requirements or to make something functionally better.

- **Continuation** - This implies a step to keep things as they are without any changes.

- **Customization** - It is a process of making minor changes something to fit any requirements.

- **Transformation** - It is a process which involves major alterations in an object.

- **Repair and maintenance** - Sometimes an existing object that is damaged or out of date needs to be repaired or renovated. This is necessary to ensure that the object is able to carry out its function properly.

The study reveals that Bishnupur has ample number of heritage sites which can be used as a base for sustainable development of the region. In order to achieve success in
regard to sustainable tourism and rural development, formulation of strategies would be the key factor.

Figure 13: Diagram showing impacts of changes after conducting heritage tourism activities

**Sustainable Tourism Strategies**

The strategies developed for a similar study in Berwick Borough council in UK by Beranard Lane suggested various strategies (Lane, 1994). Thus, Bishnupur being a potential area similar strategy with regional modifications can be implemented.

1. Developing technological competitiveness: Use of internet represents the impact of modern technology on the competitive advantage of the destination. Previously published materials used to be the only source of information about any destination. The access to internet has helped the visitors to search through a wide range of choices which were not available. The other benefit would be for the lesser known places which would have a global market and wide range of visibility to the tourists.

2. Regional analysis highlighting social, economic, ecological and cultural needs.

3. Identification of an area’s tourism and cultural assets and the constraints on future tourism development.

4. Focus on how best tourism could be used as a tool for social, economic, ecological and cultural regeneration.

5. Community involvement and participation of local authorities in both the plan-making process and in any ongoing decision-making.
6. A meticulous consideration and analysis of the visitor carrying capacities, and the type and scale of developments suitable for each part of the region.

7. A market survey to establish opportunities and a marketing strategy. This strategy should both explain and use the Sustainable Tourism Strategy as part of its campaign.

8. Training programme aiming to encourage new local businesses in the tourism sector and help the local people to develop their business plans.

9. Awareness programme designed to develop visitor knowledge of the area, increase insight and satisfaction, improve customer care and help ensure repeat visits.

10. The setting up of local groups to monitor, advice, and assist future management.

11. Apart from tourism industry, agriculture and cottage industries should be highlighted.

12. To have effective strategies they should be long term in their approach. There must be quantifiable targets, prioritization of goals and regular evaluation process and regular up-dating of objectives.

**Conclusion**

Heritage tourism activities in the heritage sites in the Bishupur have great potentials to attract tourists and improving present condition of tourism in this region. The identification of the cultural assets in the present state and implications after activities may bring some transformation on cultural landscape elements in the area, which influence the whole cultural landscape sustainability. Five types of changes are found: addition, continuation, customization, transformation and repair and maintenance. If these changes are effected then they will not only improve or increase the value of landscape elements, but will also harmonize the cultural landscape sustainability.

Meanwhile, we should take the help of modern technology to make the visitors, local people and local authorities aware about the uncontrolled tourism development that will lead to the character changes. It is of utmost concern to sustain the rural environment, its cultural heritages and assets thereby maintaining the balanced relationship between human culture and nature systems to achieve the goals of sustainable development. Following this line of planning, heritage tourism can truly become a panacea for rural development.

**References**


