

Exploring the Cultural Tapestry: A Geographical Study of Heritage Tourism in West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

Nestled in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, Bengal proudly showcases a heritage interwoven with a rich tapestry of culture, history and tradition. From the awe-inspiring architectural wonders of ancient temples in Bishnupur to the majestic colonial splendor embodied by Kolkata's Victoria Memorial, each site eloquently narrates a compelling chapter in Bengal's illustrious history. This abstract delves into the essence of Bengal's heritage tourism, exploring its multifaceted attractions and celebrating its rich tapestry of culture, history and tradition.

Keywords: Tourism; Heritage; Culture; Archaeological sites; Tourist

INTRODUCTION

West Bengal, nestled in the Eastern part of India, is a land imbued with a rich tapestry of culture, history and natural beauty. Steeped in centuries of heritage, the state is a treasure trove of diverse attractions that draw travelers from far and wide. From ancient architectural marvels to colonial remnants, vibrant festivals and serene natural landscapes, West Bengal offers a captivating journey through time and tradition. Heritage tourism in West Bengal is not merely about visiting historical monuments or natural wonders; it is a voyage into the heart and soul of a region shaped by a kaleidoscope of influences [1]. From the ancient civilizations of the Mauryas, Guptas and Palas to the colonial rule of the British Empire, each era has left its indelible mark on the cultural landscape of the state. The architectural splendors of West Bengal are a testament to its glorious past. From the terracotta temples of Bishnupur to the majestic Victoria Memorial in Kolkata, these structures narrate stories of craftsmanship, devotion and power. The colonial heritage of Kolkata, once the capital of British India, is evident in its stately buildings, bustling markets and vibrant street life, offering a glimpse into the bygone era of the raj. Beyond its architectural heritage, West Bengal's cultural vibrancy is unparalleled. The state is synonymous with festivals like Durga Puja, which transforms its cities and towns into a spectacle of colors, lights and celebrations. The literary legacy of luminaries like Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray continues to inspire generations, while traditional arts like music, dance and crafts

thrive in every corner of the state. Moreover, West Bengal's natural beauty adds another dimension to its heritage tourism. The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest and a UNESCO world heritage site, is home to the iconic royal Bengal tiger and a haven for wildlife enthusiasts and nature lovers. The tranquil hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong offer panoramic views of the Himalayas, tea plantations and a glimpse into the region's colonial past [2].

Objectives of the study

- To analyze the spatial distribution of heritage tourism sites across different regions of West Bengal.
- To assess the socio-cultural significance of heritage sites.
- To identify and analyze the sustainability challenges facing heritage tourism in West Bengal.
- To study the present status and trends in the flow of heritage tourists to West Bengal.
- To analyse the different issues and concerns which are related to cultural heritage tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage properties have garnered significant attention from scholars worldwide due to their importance in preserving cultural identity and history. Writers, scholars and researchers have devoted attention to their preservation and maintenance, with regular articles appearing in local and national newspapers. UNESCO director Minja Yang has rightly said: Spirituality and

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culture are very significant for whole of South-East Asia and South Asia. The glory of Indian heritage has highlighted about the historical aspects of Indian culture.

- Upadhya and Chandra in "heritage tourism in India: A review" provide a comprehensive review of heritage tourism in India, examining its historical evolution, cultural significance and economic impacts.
- Molesworth, S.R. has rightly pointed out that heritage and development add value to each other.
- "Heritage tourism in India: A review of current research and future directions" by Sunita Reddy and M. Sivakumar Reddy and Siva Kumar review current research on heritage tourism in India, focusing on themes such as visitor motivations, destination management and cultural sustainability.
- Rehmath Jahan heritage tourism in south Tamil Nadu-India, heritage tourism involves services to tourists with the occasion to understand and pleasure from uniqueness of natural and heritage features.
- Shankar attempts to probe the scope of heritage tourism in India, which can help in shaping our society. Heritage tourism is considered as one sector that shall propel growth, contribute foreign exchange, enhance employability and result in community development.
- Nagothu "Indian heritage tourism: Challenges and prospects" explores the challenges and prospects of Indian heritage tourism, focusing on issues such as infrastructure development, visitor management and stakeholder coordination.
- "Heritage tourism: An introduction" edited by Dallen J. Timothy and Gyan P. Nyaupane, this edited volume provides a comprehensive overview of heritage tourism from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including geography, anthropology, sociology and tourism studies.
- Dr. Bhutia provides a theoretical framework for tourism development in West Bengal and their associated issues and concerns. The objectives of his study to promote West Bengal as preferred destination for visitors and provides opportunities for tourism business which will improve the economy of the people and thereby generates revenue for the State as well.
- Ahamed M in his study showing theoretical framework for cultural heritage tourism development in West Bengal and their associated issues and concerns.

The research is purely based on secondary data. The data have been collected from various national and international journals, books and websites.

- The annual report 2019-2020, ministry of tourism, government of India.
- Reports of state/union territory tourism.
- Departments report 2022, bureau of immigration, India.
- India tourism statistics 2010-2020, government of India.
- Ministry of tourism, Govt. of West Bengal.

DISCUSSION

Types of heritage tourism

Heritage is that object, tangible or intangible, natural or manmade, which has been inherited, not created by present generation. There are several types of heritage [3].

- Natural e.g., air, water, beautiful landscape, pristine environment etc.
- **Cultural:** It has two types. Tangible which can be seen, touched and felt, e.g.; forts, palaces, temples, sculpture etc. Intangible, this cannot be touched but can be felt, e.g., religion, mythology, rites, rituals, traditions, music and dance etc.

The heritage items take a long time to germinate and grow, but their survival depend on many factors and they could be destroyed or killed at any moment. It all depends on the will and association of inheritor to protect the heritage tradition. On international level UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) is responsible for the exploration, protection and preservation of natural and cultural heritage. UNESCO convened a general conference in 1972 in which the world heritage convention was adopted. At present, more than 180 countries have ratified it to protect the cultural and natural heritage. India ratified the convention on November 14, 1977 (Figure 1).

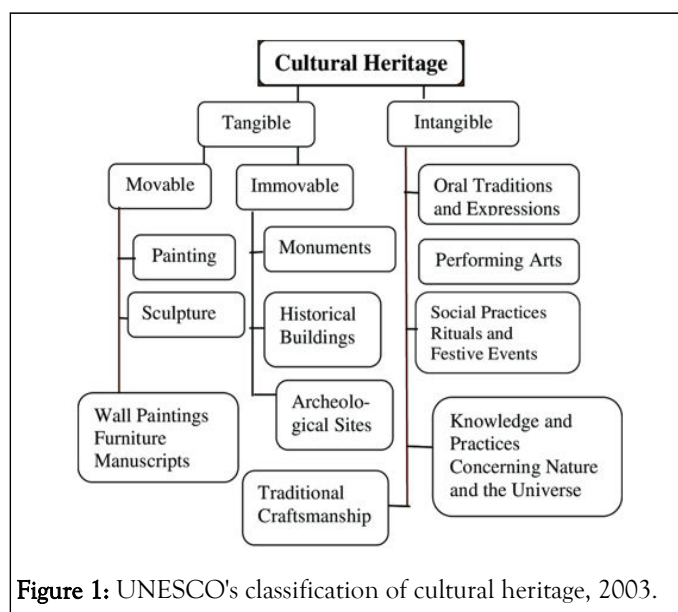


Figure 1: UNESCO's classification of cultural heritage, 2003.

Heritage tourism trends in India

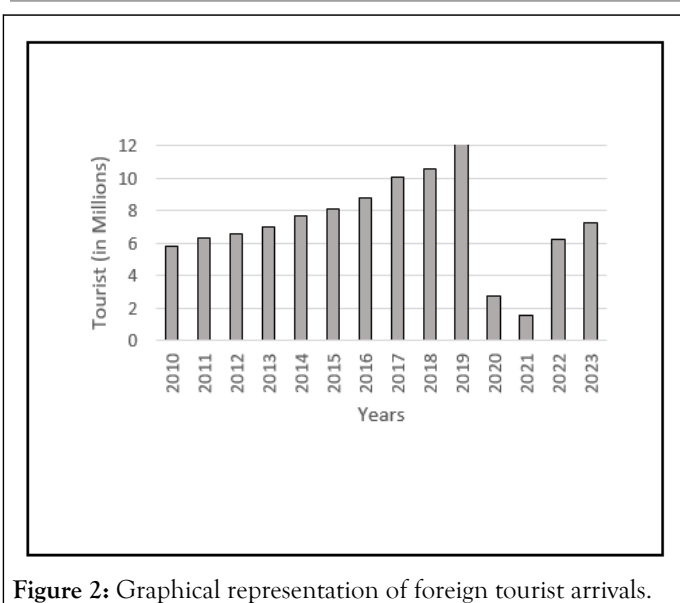
India's rich cultural, historical and natural heritage attracts millions of tourists annually. Over recent years, heritage tourism in India has experienced remarkable growth, thanks to additional government initiatives aimed at enhancing the country's image as a prime heritage tourism destination. Renowned for their richness and allure, Indian heritage tourism offerings captivate foreign visitors [4]. The country's splendid past, coupled with its cultural diversity, forms a compelling blend that draws millions of foreign tourists to its heritage sites each year. To promote heritage tourism, the government of India and the ministry of tourism and culture extend various

benefits to states known for their tourist attractions. India's abundant heritage finds expression in its religious temples, palaces, monuments and forts scattered across the nation, contributing to the burgeoning heritage tourism sector. Notable heritage tourism destinations include the Taj Mahal in Agra, the Red Fort in Delhi, Mahabalipuram, Madurai, Lucknow, Darjeeling Himalayan railway, Varanasi, Amritsar, Bodh Gaya and the Durga Puja festivities in West Bengal. Among these, the

Taj Mahal stands out as a top attraction, drawing the highest number of tourists due to its status as one of the seven wonders of the world (Figure 2). Crafted entirely from marble, the Taj Mahal showcases intricate inlay work executed in a meticulous and exquisite style (Table 1).

Table 1: Bureau of immigration, Govt. of India.

Year	FTAs
2010	5.78
2011	6.31
2012	6.57
2013	6.97
2014	7.68
2015	8.08
2016	8.8
2017	10.04
2018	10.56
2019	10.93
2020	2.74
2021	1.52
2022	6.21
2023	7.24



Heritage tourism in West Bengal

Heritage tourism in West Bengal encompasses a rich tapestry of historical, cultural and architectural attractions that draw visitors from around the world. Heritage tourism in West Bengal encompasses a rich tapestry of historical, cultural and architectural attractions that draw visitors from around the world. West Bengal has a rich history and culture dating back several centuries. The state offers tourists the opportunity to explore the state's diverse and rich history through its historical attractions, heritage sites, ancient temples, colonial architecture, museums, art galleries and many more. West Bengal's rich history beckons both domestic and international tourists alike. Undoubtedly, Bengal stands out as one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse states in the country [5]. Its vibrant tapestry includes various ethnicities, cultures, religions, peoples and languages, enriching its already picturesque landscape. The table below showing the flow of domestic and foreign tourist arrivals (Tables 2-4).

Table 2: Top five states in domestic tourist flow.

States	% of domestic tourist
Tamil Nadu	23.05
Uttar Pradesh	14.11
Karnataka	12.69
Andhra Pradesh	11.6
Telangana	6.6
Maharashtra	6.4
West Bengal	4.7

Table 3: Top five states in foreign tourist flow.

States	% of foreign tourist
Maharashtra	17.60%
Tamil Nadu	17.1
Uttar Pradesh	12.40%
Delhi	9.50%
West Bengal	6.50%

Table 4: Famous heritage tourist attraction of West Bengal.

Heritage places of interest	Location
Victorial Memorial, Indian Museum, Sovabazar Rajbari, Jorasanko	Kolkata
Bandel church, Serampore, Chandannagar, Kamarpukur	Hoogly
Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, Tarapith	Birbhum
Hazaruari Palace, Lalbagh Cemetery, Garden of Motijheel and The Katara Mosque, Palassy	Murshidabad
Gour, Adina Mosque	Malda
Bishnupur Temples, Rasamancha	Bankura
Nabadwip, Mayapur ISKCON Temple	Nadia
Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, Ghum Station	Darjeeling
Sunderban National Park	South 24 Parganas
Cooch Behar Palace	Cooch Behar
Neora Valley National Park	Kalimpong

Architecture and monumental heritage

There are many monuments in West Bengal which are unique and excellent in their cultural history and importance.

Victoria Memorial: Majestic marble building in Kolkata honoring Queen Victoria, blending Indo-Saracenic and British architecture, with a colonial history museum [6].

Howrah Bridge: Iconic cantilever bridge connecting Kolkata and Howrah over the Hooghly river, symbolizing the city's industrial heritage and bustling traffic.

Belur Math: Headquarters of Ramakrishna math and mission in Kolkata, known for serene ambiance and architectural blend of Hindu, Christian and Islamic styles.

Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (Toy train): UNESCO world heritage site showcasing Victorian engineering through picturesque Darjeeling hills.

Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Ghum Museum: Situated in Ghum, highest station on the railway, exhibits history and impact of the railway on the region.

Bishnupur Temples: Terracotta temples in Bankura district, built during the Malla Dynasty, featuring intricate carvings depicting Hindu mythology scenes.

Hazarduari Palace: Grand palace in Murshidabad from the Nawabi era, boasting Italianate architecture and housing a museum of period artifacts.

Religious heritage: West Bengal boasts a rich religious heritage, attracting pilgrims and tourists from diverse backgrounds. These religious centers are renowned for their architectural magnificence, offering visitors a glimpse into their beauty. Dakshineswar Kali temple in Kolkata, constructed by Rani Rashmoni in the 19th century, stands on the Hooghly River's Eastern bank, devoted to goddess Kali and linked with the mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Similarly, Kalighat Kali temple, one of Kolkata's oldest, is revered as one of the 51 Shakti peethas, drawing devotees seeking blessings from goddess Kali. During Durga Puja, Kolkata illuminates with thousands of pandals adorned with goddess Durga idols, captivating millions of devotees and tourists alike. Mayapur in Nadia district, the birthplace of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and home to the ISKCON temple, serves as a sanctuary for spiritual seekers following the Gaudiya Vaishnavism tradition. Other notable destinations in the state include Chandannagar Church, Kamarpukur, Belur Math, Bandel Church, Tarapith, Pathar Chapuri, Tarakeswar and Furfura Sharif in Hooghly district [7].

Natural heritage: West Bengal's natural treasures, like Sundarbans National park and Darjeeling Himalayan range, host diverse ecosystems and rare wildlife. Singalila National park and Jaldapara National park offer breathtaking landscapes and wildlife encounters. Buxa Tiger reserve is biodiverse with historical significance. The Dooars region is known for adventure activities, while coastal areas like Digha and Mandarmani are popular for relaxation and water sports.

Traditional arts and crafts: West Bengal is renowned for its distinctive arts and crafts, characterized by their elusive beauty

and unique allure. These handicrafts, known for their rustic and mystical charm, captivate art enthusiasts worldwide. Bishnupur, located in the Bankura district, is famed for its terracotta temples and artifacts, intricately crafted by skilled artisans, depicting scenes from Hindu mythology. The traditional art of Patachitra, practiced in Medinipur, showcases vibrant scroll paintings. Dokra, a traditional metal casting form, thrives among tribal communities in West Bengal, while Kantha embroidery adds exquisite detailing to sarees. Pottery, an ancient craft of Bengal, flourishes in various styles across the state, including the renowned clay dolls of Krishna Nagar, sought after in the European market.

Festivals: Tourism in West Bengal is greatly influenced by its vibrant festival culture, with the state hosting numerous celebrations throughout the year. This provides tourists with a unique chance to immerse themselves in the region's rich cultural heritage. The saying "baro mase tero parban" epitomizes this tradition, emphasizing the year-round festivity in West Bengal. Major festivals such as Durga puja, Charak puja, Nabanno, Lakshmi puja and Kali puja, among others, draw significant attention. Durga puja, in particular, stands out as the most iconic festival, attracting millions of visitors globally to witness its elaborate pandals and colorful processions.

Culinary tourism: West Bengal's heritage tourism potential also extends to its cuisine. Bengali food is famous for its unique blend of sweet and spicy flavors and the state is home to several iconic dishes like Roshogolla, Sandesh and Machher jhol. Culinary tourism is becoming increasingly popular in India and West Bengal's rich culinary heritage is a significant draw for tourists looking to explore the state's culture through its cuisine (Figure 3).

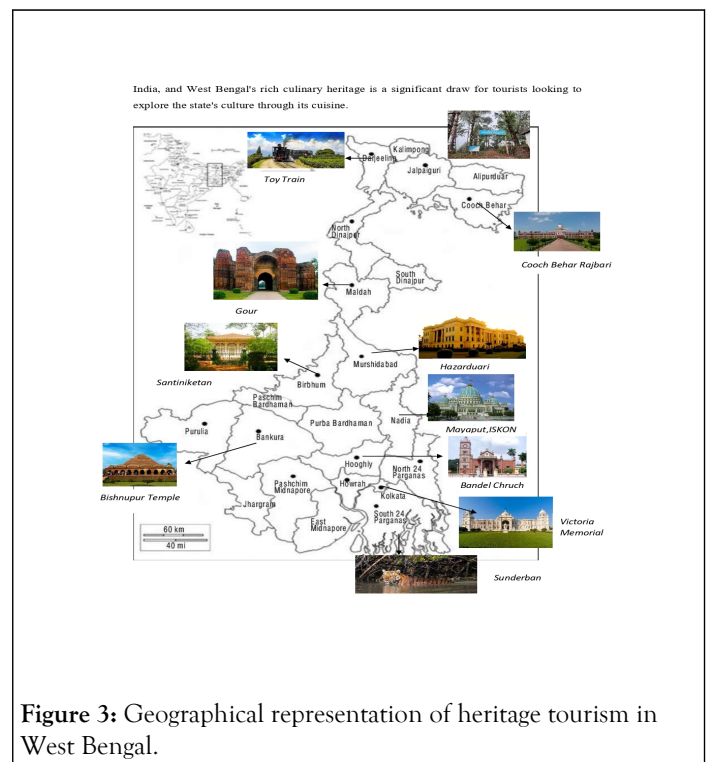


Figure 3: Geographical representation of heritage tourism in West Bengal.

Initiative taken by government of West Bengal for promoting heritage tourism

Over the past few years, the West Bengal state government has embarked on multiple initiatives to boost heritage tourism. The ministry of tourism has earmarked specific sites within the state as priority destinations and allocated funds for their enhancement. Concurrently, the government has introduced various programs aimed at bolstering tourism, such as the 'experience Bengal' campaign, designed to spotlight the state's diverse cultural and natural treasures on a global stage [8].

Among the noteworthy endeavours is the implementation of the Swadesh Darshan scheme, a nationwide effort to cultivate and promote tourist circuits. Within this framework, West Bengal has secured funding for the development of several heritage circuits including the Ganga heritage circuit, Sunderbans heritage circuit and Buddhist circuit. These circuits are envisioned to foster sustainable tourism practices while generating employment opportunities for local communities.

Furthermore, the government has undertaken measures to upgrade infrastructure and amenities at heritage sites. Significant renovation work has been carried out at the Victoria Memorial, while efforts have been made to enhance facilities at the Sunderbans and other heritage locations across the state.

The government of West Bengal has taken several steps to promote heritage tourism in the state, recognizing the potential of its rich cultural and historical heritage. Some of the key initiatives include:

Infrastructure development: The government invests in preserving and enhancing heritage sites, improving accessibility, signage and facilities for visitors [9].

Heritage walks and tours: Guided tours in cities like Kolkata and towns like Bishnupur offer insights into historical and cultural significance.

Cultural festivals: Events like Durga puja and Kolkata International Film Festival celebrate heritage through music, dance and cuisine.

Tourism campaigns: Initiatives like "Experience Bengal" promote heritage attractions through various media channels.

Heritage conservation: Efforts include documenting traditional crafts and supporting artisans.

Private sector collaboration: Partnerships with tour operators and hotels develop sustainable tourism offerings.

Community engagement: Local involvement in decision-making and initiatives like homestays promote community-based tourism.

Skill development: Training programs improve the quality of services provided by guides and hospitality staff [10].

CONCLUSION

Despite initiatives by the government to promote heritage tourism in West Bengal, there is still room for improvement in marketing, infrastructure and facilities at heritage sites. However, the state's immense potential for heritage tourism, coupled with its rich cultural and historical heritage, makes it a captivating destination for travellers. By addressing challenges and leveraging its heritage responsibly, West Bengal can continue to enchant visitors while preserving its legacy for future generations.

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