



NAVIGATING TOURISM PROSPECTS: A STUDY OF SAGAR ISLAND

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Abstract

Tourism as an industry is growing worldwide. It has transformed into a lifestyle choice embraced across different cultures. The study looks into the case of tourism in Sagar Island, which is already a popular destination for religious tourism and holds the potential to grow as a Nature tourism destination also. The primary aim of this research is to analyse the existing trends in tourist visits within the study area. By assessing these trends, we seek to determine whether there is untapped potential for further growth. Additionally, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for optimizing the utilization of this potential. The study is mainly Based on a Primary survey conducted between March to June 2023. Data needed for the study were collected through open-ended interviews and group discussions with locals and govt officials and field observations. Results suggest the number of tourists is increasing on the island. This rapid increase in tourist arrivals on the island presents a unique economic opportunity. To fully capitalise on this potential, we suggest implementing effective planning and management strategies. By carefully coordinating infrastructure development, environmental conservation, and visitor experiences, the island can achieve economic gains.

Keywords: *Tourism; Religious Tourism; Nature Tourism; Gangasagar; Sagar Island*

Introduction

Growing economies worldwide are driving an increasing demand for tourism, transforming it into a lifestyle choice embraced across different cultures (Holden, 2016). Tourism involves various service-based activities across different industries and consumer spending categories (Eadington, Redman, 1991). While tourism is a well-established industry, research in this field remains relatively small, new, and focused inwardly (Buckley, 2011). The study looks into the case of Sagar Island which is already a popular destination for religious tourism and holds the potential to grow as a Nature tourism destination also. The unique ecosystem of Sagar Island is characterized by resource combination at the interface of land and sea offering beaches, scenic beauty, rich terrestrial and marine biodiversity, diversified cultural and historic heritage, etc (Hajra and Ghosh, 2014). Gangasagar a village located in the southern part of the Island, is a significant site for pilgrims and travelers due to its religious and spiritual identity. Gangasagar holds mythological ties with the ashram of the saint Kapil Muni and tells of the legend of King Sagar. The Kapil Muni Temple at Gangasagar has been the place for rituals and prayers, further amplifying the island's captivation for the seekers of spirituality. These rich mythological stories appeal to

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pilgrims and travelers. Especially on Makar Sankranti, a great number of Hindus gather here and take holy dips at the confluence of the river Hugli and the Bay of Bengal. The island attracted remarkable scholarly attention due to its cultural significance. As a popular pilgrimage destination, Sagar Island experiences several economic activities surrounding it.

Study area: Sagar Island, situated at the mouth of the Hugli River, covers an area of 251.58 square kilometers, making it the largest island in the Sundarbans. Its longitudinal extension ranges from 21°37'21" N to 21°52'28" N, and its latitudinal extension spans from 88°2'17" E to 88°10'25" E. The island's maximum width along the east-west axis is approximately 12 km, while its longest length along the north-south axis is roughly 30 km

Objectives and Methodology: The primary aim of this research is to analyse the existing trends in tourist visits within the study area. By assessing these trends, we seek to determine whether there is untapped potential for further growth. Additionally, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for optimising the utilisation of this potential. The study is mainly Based on a Primary survey conducted between March to June 2023. The data were collected through open-ended interviews and group discussions with locals and govt officials and field observations.

Tourist spots on the island

The Kapil Muni Ashram in Gangasagar Mouza holds mythological significance to the believers of the Hindu religion. It is believed to be the place where Sage Kapil Muni, associated with Samkhya philosophy, built an ashram and stayed. The ashram serves as a symbol of purification and liberation from sins. Keeping faith in mythology, lakhs and lakhs of pilgrims from across India and some neighboring states visit the ashram to take a dip in the holy water at the confluence of River Bhagirathi and the Bay of Bengal. The Gangasagar Beach also provides a scenic beauty to the tourists. Sagar Lighthouse at Beguakhali is another location that appeals the tourists.

Major occasions for tourist visits

The most important event is the Gangasagar Mela, which is the largest fair in West Bengal and one of the biggest in India, takes place pivoting the auspicious period of Makar Sankranti which generally falls either on the 14th or 15th of January. Lakhs of religious tourists from all over India visit the island for this occasion. Tourists also come from Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh. Other important occasions boosting the island's religious tourism are Magh Purnima, Buddha Purnima, and 'Sawan ka Mahina.' Magh Purnima corresponds to the full moon day in the Bangla month of Magh, typically falls in either January or February, and it is another occasion around which tourists come to visit Gangasagar. Buddha Purnima, commemorating the birth of the Siddhartha Gautam Buddha, falls either in April or May and is another event when tourists from the other parts of South 24 Parganas, north 24 Parganas, and other surrounding districts come to visit the Island. 'Sawan ka Mahina,' a Hindi term used to represent the reverence of the whole month of Sawan (Hindi) or Shravan in Bengali, which covers the end half of July and the first half of August is a sacred month to Hindu devotees who worship Lord Shiva. It is believed to be the favorite month of lord shiva. According to the Skanda Purana, Goddess Parvati's rigorous fasting during this time led to her union with Lord Shiva, further enhancing the month's significance. This month many Hindu devotees visit the island, particularly Hindi-speaking people from the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Seasonal distribution of tourists

The quantity of tourists fluctuates around a year. No of tourists is maximum in December and January month due to the event Gangasagar Mela. The frequency of tourists decreases after the fair. In February and March still, there are significant tourists to keep the tourism-related businesses running at a good profit. Pivoting the occasions of Magh Purnima and Buddha Purnima there is still a significant number of tourists come to the island. The month of Sawan or Shravan (the end half of July and the first half of August) is another time when there is a significant frequency of tourists is observed. These events peak the frequency of incoming visitors. A decade ago 8-9 months of the year were almost without visitors

making the tourism-related businesses seasonal. The pattern has also been changed. Now there are a decent amount of tourists almost during the whole year. During the survey on June 2023, Bimal Das, engaged in the transportation business very joyfully said:

“The number of tourists has surged in Gangasagar mela even all over the year. Now the business can go on for almost the whole year. A decade ago that was not the case, we could only make money for 3-4 months. And if we talk about the condition of two decades ago very less tourists were there compared to now; mainly at the time of Ganga Sagar Mela, other events were not even considerable. We used to actively work for only 60-70 days in a year.”

Potentiality of tourism

The number of tourists is increasing over time on the island. Approximately 65 lakh pilgrims from across India visited Sagar Island to take a sacred dip at the confluence of the Ganga River and the Bay of Bengal during the Ganga Sagar Mela (Singh, 2024). According to a report ‘Anandabazar Patrika’ the number was 51 lakhs (Priyankar, 2023). A report by ‘The Indian Express’ (2018) says that the state govt has claimed the number of tourists in 2018 was more than 20 lakhs. The report also says this number was around 15 lakhs in 2017. In 2008 5 lakhs tourists visited the Gangasagar Mela as reported in ‘The Statesman’ (Law, 2008) and in 2007 the number of tourists was 3 lakhs as reported in ‘The Telegraph’ (Chattopadhyay, 2007).

Table 1: *Frequency of tourists visting Gangasagar Mela*

Year	No. of tourists in Gangasar mela	Claimed by (as mentioned in the source)	Source
2024	65 lakhs	Arup Biswas (Minister for Sports and Youth Affairs, Power, and Housing in the Govt. of W. B.)	The Hindu (2024, January 15)
2023	51 lakhs	Arup Biswas (Minister for Sports and Youth Affairs, Power, and Housing in the Govt. of W. B.)	Anandabazar Patrika (2023 January 16)
2018	20 lakhs	Govt. of West Bengal	The Indian Express, (2018, January 14)
2017	15 lakhs	Govt. of West Bengal	The Indian Express, (2018, January 14)
2008	5 lakhs	Govt. of West Bengal	The Statesman (2008 January 15)
2007	3 lakhs	South 24 Parganas District officials	The Telegraph (2007 January 15)

During the survey, local people of the island particularly those who are engaged in tourism and allied activity also reported the rising potential of the tourism sector. After the lockdown phase of COVID-19, there has been a significant surge in the number of tourists coming to Gangasagar Mela. In this context, Dhiman Maity an automobile driver working in the transport sector mentioned:

“There is a 70-80 percent increase in the number of tourists in Ganga Sagar Mela in the year just after the lockdown phase (2023) compared to the year before the lockdown phase (2020).”

Along with Gangasagar Mela, the number of tourists is rising on other religious occasions also. Tourism in Sagar Island is becoming more regular from only being a seasonal sector. Tourists have been present throughout the year in recent times. As Basudeb Mondol dictated:

“20-25 years ago exempt from Gangasagar Mela there were no tourists for the rest of the year. There were not any countable tourists on other occasions like Budhha Purnima, Magh Purnima, or other festivals.”

Looking at the economic opportunity of the growing number of tourists many inhabitants are shifting from traditional economic activities like agriculture and fishing to tourism-related businesses. In this context, Bikash Giri shared his career journey:

“After making losses in agriculture for two years consecutively, I joined the transportation business in 2011..... I have two tata sumo cars now. Tourists are increasing. I am thinking of buying one more vehicle after this Durga puja and involving my younger brother also.”

The number of tourists is booming on the island. This rapid increase in tourist arrivals on the island presents a unique economic opportunity. However, to fully capitalise on this potential, it is crucial to implement effective planning and management strategies. By carefully coordinating infrastructure development, environmental conservation, and visitor experiences, the island can achieve economic gains.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Sagar Island already has a mythological significance and popularity among religious tourists of the Hindu religion. But they only visit Kapil Muni Ashram and Gangasagar beach. Some also visit the Beguakhlai lighthouse and beach. Only Gangasagar remains the prime spot for tourist destinations. The authorities have established rudimentary infrastructure for Beguakhali Beach as a scenic destination, but it remains insufficient to elevate it to a prominent tourist spot. Further development and promotion are necessary.

On the island, other places like ‘Chandipur Beach’ and ‘Sagar Beach’ have captivating natural scenic beauty that has the potential to become destinations for eco-tourism. Developing these lesser-known locations could broaden the scope of tourism beyond religious pilgrimage, fostering nature-based tourism as well. Although having scenic beauty these places are lacking in good transportation network, availability of drinking water, and other facilities around these spots. By providing these facilities these spots can be developed as scenic tourist spots which are lacking in Sagar Island.

To develop and popularise these less-known places putting attractive posters of these spots on roads via which tourists come to visit Gangasagar and the Surrounding Kapil Muni Ashram will persuade many among the lakhs and lakhs of visitors who already come to the island to visit Gangasagar. To promote tourism and attract new visitors who may not be aware of the island’s beauty and significance, developing an attractive website and running social media campaigns could be a good option in this digital era.

Collaboration among local government bodies, tourism authorities, and environmental agencies is essential to develop a cohesive strategic plan for beach tourism. This plan should align the objectives of all participating organizations and facilitate seamless coordination. By working collectively, they can improve beach management practices and promote sustainable tourism.

Promoting tourism can significantly strengthen the island’s economy by generating livelihoods and employment opportunities for its residents, especially those facing challenges in traditional sectors like

agriculture and fishing. Furthermore, diversifying tourism across various locations on the island will ensure a more equitable distribution of the benefits derived from this industry.

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