

ABSTRACT

ASSESSING POTENTIAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN NORTH BENGAL: A TOURISM REVIVAL STRATEGIC PLANNING

Sanmoy Mallick

Tourist destination selection is the determination of a geographic site on which a tourism sector can flourish, in both the means of customers as well as investors. A tourist destination is an essential part of the sustainable economic development of a region as it serves to attract both domestic and foreign tourists, improve the livelihoods of local residents, facilitate the creation of tourist-friendly infrastructure, and enhance accessibility to the area (Goodwin, 2008; Pulido-Fernandez et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2013; Carballo et al., 2015). Finding out the potential tourist destinations among all the tourist destinations of any particular region is also very challenging. Assessment of those potential tourist destinations from the tourism investment perspective is very helpful for the development of that particular tourist destination as well as for that region (Meidan, 1984; Haider and Rein, 1993; Gołembski et al., 2010; Bouadam, 2011). The market share and profitability of the tourism industry depend on a suitable tourist destination that improves the convenience of tourism investors by reducing the payback period for fixed capital investments. According to the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Development Index (2021), India is currently ranked 54th but is expected to become one of the top five business travel markets by 2030. With 100% Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) permitted in the tourism industry through the automatic route, as stated by Invest India (2021), the travel and tourism sector presents significant growth opportunities for the Indian economy. To achieve holistic economic growth, regional areas also offer ample potential to contribute towards the same. Therefore, our study focuses on three areas: Hill, Dooars, and Plain, covering eight districts in the North Bengal Region of West Bengal, India, which is already home to several popular and emerging tourist destinations.

A total of 96 probable tourist destinations were identified in three areas of North Bengal, and from these, 77 potential tourist destinations were selected based on three factors: Physical, Cultural, and Heritage (McKercher and Ho, 2006; Edward and George, 2008; Bhuiyan et al., 2011; Abuamoud et al., 2016; Secondi et. al., 2011; Baniya et al., 2017). To evaluate these potential destinations for tourism investment, it is essential to consider multiple criteria. Five major criteria, namely Accessibility, Destination Infrastructure, Local Skilled Workers, Local Attractiveness, and Local Aspects, along with 15 sub-criteria derived from various works of literature, have been finalized (McIntosh and Goeldner, 1990; Jha, 1995; Burton, 1995; Seetanah et al., 2011; Sangkakorn et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2016; Morozov & Morozova, 2016). The objective to be achieved in this study is to assess the potential tourist destinations (multiple alternatives) based on tourism investment criteria (multiple criteria) and rank all those individual potential tourist destinations. By identifying the most promising destinations, this study also aims to contribute to strategic planning for the overall development of tourism in the region. The process of selecting the most promising potential tourist destinations using multiple criteria constitutes a strategic multi-criteria decision-making (MCDM) problem. In this study, the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), a widely recognized MCDM tool (Saaty, 1980; Chen, 2006; Lai & Vinh, 2012; Kundakçi et al., 2014), is proposed as the methodology for selecting potential tourist destinations for tourism investment.

An Integrated Tourism Investment Model has been developed based on the major five and fifteen sub-criteria which helped in the understanding of the study's objective. According to the AHP theory, experts' opinion was taken to form a pair-wise comparison matrix based on the relative importance among five (5) major criteria, and major criteria weight was achieved following the computational process of the AHP method. Fifteen (15) sub-criteria were derived from those Five (5) major criteria to get the detailed

analysis for those seventy-seven (77) individual potential tourist destinations (alternatives) (Caputo et al, 2013). In order to collect those data, a questionnaire was formed for individual destinations using a 5-point Likert scale. The effectiveness of the AHP method was demonstrated by using the collected data for potential tourist destinations in the Hill, Dooars, and Plain areas of the North Bengal region. Five individual pairwise comparison matrices were formed based on the major criteria weights and overall rankings were achieved for each destination, considering tourism investment perspectives. The findings of this study are expected to be beneficial for both policymakers and private entrepreneurs. Policymakers can utilize the results to develop tourism infrastructure in areas with high potential for attracting visitors to the region, while private entrepreneurs can leverage the information to identify promising investment opportunities with the potential for lucrative returns.

Signature: *Sunmoy Halder*

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