Religious Tourism and Its Impact on Local Economy and Environment: A Case Study on Dakshineswar and Adyapeath, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

In last few decades tourism has become a rising industry throughout the world. But religious tourism which is mostly related to the pilgrimage is marked by its antiquity. Dakshineswar and Adyapeath are two famous religious tourist spot of West Bengal, India. The famous Dakshineswar temple which houses the Goddess Kali was founded by Rani Rashmoni in the year of 1847. On the contrary Dakshineswar Ramkrishna Sangha Adyapeath was founded in 1921 by Annada Charan Bhattacharya who is popularly known as Sri Annada Thakur. Thousands of tourists and visitors come here throughout the year. Undoubtedly tourism development leads to economic and infrastructural development of a region. But it has some negative impact also. The aims of the article are to discuss the prospects and problems of religious tourism of the said areas. Recent skywalk project of West Bengal Government and its impact on locality is also a major topic of discussion.

Keywords: *religious tourism, pilgrimage, development, skywalk project*

Introduction

Geography is an interdisciplinary subject and its novel branch Sacred Geography has emerged where interrelationship between 'Religion' and 'Space' has been exhibited. Interdisciplinary studies in Geography and Religion, then raise issues of power and knowledge in our understanding of Eliadean Sacred Space (Jamie S. Scott 2001). At the same time, interdisciplinary studies in literature and religion have begun to explore writings which give narrative, dramatic and poetic shape to different religions, myths and symbols, rituals and values, heroes and histories, and so forth. Rarely, however, have scholars sought to examine literature under the double rubric of the religious and the geographical. While many branches of geography are scientific in perspective and method, what is clear from the Hindu India is that its geographical features------ its rivers, mountains, hills, and coastlands------ no matter how precisely rendered, mapped, or measured, are also charged with stories of gods and heroes. This feeling of "sacred" invokes a connectedness, a presence of the blessing of existence. It is "sacred" when it becomes for us a "window to the Kingdom of God" and a reminder of the sacredness of all space as space created by God (James M. Rubenstein & Robert S. Bacon 1990)

Dakshineswar and Adyapeath are two renowned religious tourist spots of West Bengal. Thousands of Hindu pilgrims visit the spots throughout the year. Thus, different tourism related activities have been developed here and significant numbers of local people are directly or indirectly involved. But it has been observed that there are some negative impacts of religious tourism on environment.

Location

The Latitude and Longitude of Dakshineswar Kali Temple Kolkata is 22.665232^{o}N 88.4094476^{o}E respectively. It is situated on the eastern bank of RiverHugli and the elevation is almost 8m from MSL. Administratively the temple is under ward no. 14 of Kamarhati Municipality, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. According to the earlier deed (1855) total area of the temple complex was 20 acres.

Adyapeath Kali Temple is located just one km away from Dakshineswar Kali Temple. The coordinate is 22°39'38"N and 88°21'48"E. It is also under Kamarhati Municipality (ward no. 14).

About the study area

In the early 1800s, Dakshineswar was a small village along the eastern banks of the River Hugli. The picturesque details by J C Marshman in the January 1845 issue of Calcutta Review mentions "A little higher up we have the village of Dukhinsore, remarkable chiefly for the country seat, mapped down in the map of Hastie's Garden, but which has repeatedly changed hands during the last thirty years. To the north of it lies the Powder Magazine. During the last four years which have elapsed since Joseph's map was published, four elegant houses have sprung up to the south of the garden."

Dense forest surrounded the area where the famous Dakshineswar temple stands today. It was 300 years back when Durgaprasad Roy Choudhury and Bhavaniprasad Roy Choudhury, members of the renowned Savarna Roy Choudhury family settled here. Yogindranath one of the successors of this family was an ardent devotee of Sri Ramakrishna who later was known as Swami Yogananda.

The famous Dakshineswar temple which houses the Goddess Kali was founded by Rani Rashmoni following a dream she saw when she was about to start on her pilgrimage to Benaras. A long term plan of the Rani materialized which she had longed to perform when her husband died with unfulfilled wish of constructing a Kali temple. The dream had moved the Rani intensely and she instructed her trusted people specially her youngest son-in law to look for plots to construct the Kali Temple. After a massive hunt for suitable plots, a 20-acred plot in the village of Dakshineswar was selected. The land resembled a hump of a tortoise.

One part of this land belonged to a European Christian while the other part was a Muslim burial ground. The Rani began to construct this Hindu temple in 1847 on this very ground thus integrating different faiths. The Deed of endowment states "In order to fulfill his wish, on 6th September 1847 I purchased 54.4 bighas of land at the cost of Rs. 42 thousand and 500 from James Hasty. I made to build a puca Navaratna temple, twelve Shiva temples (twelve jyotirlingam), a Vishnu temple and a Natmandir on the land. On 31st May 1855 I placed Luxminarayan Shila in the Navaratna temple as per the wish of my late husband and also for the welfare of his soul." The deed was executed on 31st May 1855.

Dakshineswar Ramkrishna Sangha Adyapeath, founded in 1921 by Sri Annada Thakur (Annada Charan Bhattacharya), is an organization dedicated to the service of humanity and the worship of the Divine Mother. Sri Annada Thakur believed us all to be the sons and daughters of the same Mother. Therefore, every monk in the Sangha is addressed as *bhai* (Bengali for "brother").

Objectives

The present research mainly deals with the following objectives----

[1] To focus on potential tourist resources mainly the cultural tourist resource.

[2] To evaluate the existing tourism infrastructure (i.e. transport-communication, hotel and restaurant etc.) of this place.

[3] To assess the impact of religious tourism on local economy and people (e.g. hotel and transport workers, guide, hawkers who are directly involved in tourism).

[4] To focus on environmental problems related to the tourism development.

[5] Finally, a conclusive suggestion on geographical perspective to overcome the problems.

Data base and Methodology

Here 50 shops, 10 hotels and 75 tourists have been selected for questionnaire survey. Random and stratified random sampling method has been adopted for the current study. To complete this work various quantitative and qualitative techniques have been accepted. The entire work has been done through different but three successive stages.

Pre-Field stage

It was the first stage during when the basic secondary information has been collected from various books, scholarly articles and websites. A research proposal was also prepared.

Field work stage

It was mainly the stage of primary and secondary data collection. Primary data was collected by questionnaire survey. Here, the survey was conducted on market, hotels, tourists and local people who are directly or indirectly involved with the religious tourism of the area. Map of the study area and some secondary information have been collected from Kamarhati Municipality.

Post-Field stage

It was the stage of tabulation, manipulation and analysis of the collected information. Analysis can be divided into two parts---- a) descriptive b) statistical and cartographic. On the basis of this an article has been written.

Infrastructural Development, Tourism and Local Economy

Transport and Communication

Dakshineswar is marked by its well transport network. The nearest railway station is Dakshineswar (Sealdah-Dankuni and Sealdah-Baruipara link) which is just 0.5 km away from the temple. There are several bus routes which connect suburban areas like Amtala, Garia, Naktala of Kolkata and Bangaon, Barasat, Basrhat, Birati and Madhyamgram of North 24 Paraganas. Apart from this, many local and state bus routes of Haora and Hugli Districts have connectivity with Dakshineswar. Auto, e-rickshaw (popularly known as Toto) and paddle-rickshaw are available for Adyapeath and other local places. Rickshaw pullers and Toto drivers are mainly local people. They earn more during the religious festive season.

With the state government assuring help, Dakshineswar is likely to get linked to the north-south metro corridor soon.Work on the 4.38 km stretch between Noapara and Dakshineswar has already started from the Dakshineswar-end. Work on the Dakshineswar station is also underway. Not only tourists but even the local population at the temple town and neighbouring areas will be benefitted once the metro connectivity happens.

Except road transport, water transport plays a vital role in communication. Ferry service has been started from newly established Bhabatarini Ghat. From Dakshineswar, tourists would be able to travel easily to Belur Math by the available ferry service.

On March, 17, 2015 Chief Ministerof West Bengal Mamata Banerjee laid the foundation stone of a 400m-long elevated walkway above the congested Rani Rashmoni Road that leads to Dakshineswar temple. The proposed project, hence, aims to separate vehicles from pedestrians and non-motorized vehicles like cycles, vans and rickshaws, thereby reducing congestion at the primary approach road to the temple complex. Once the Skywalk comes up, reaching the temple from the Dakshineswar island would become convenient for pedestrians as well as those in cars. Very recently the elevated pathway, constructed to link the railway station in Dakshineswar with the Kali temple has been opened for the pilgrims.
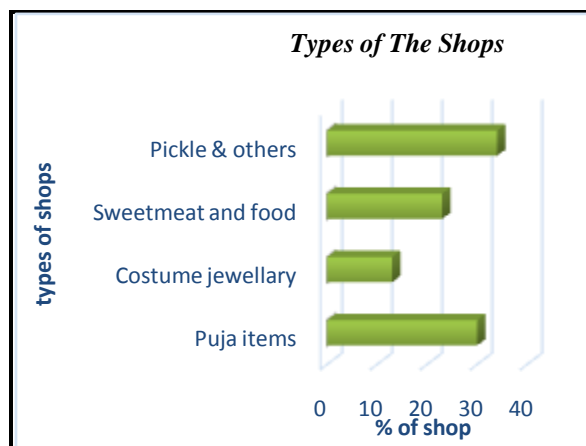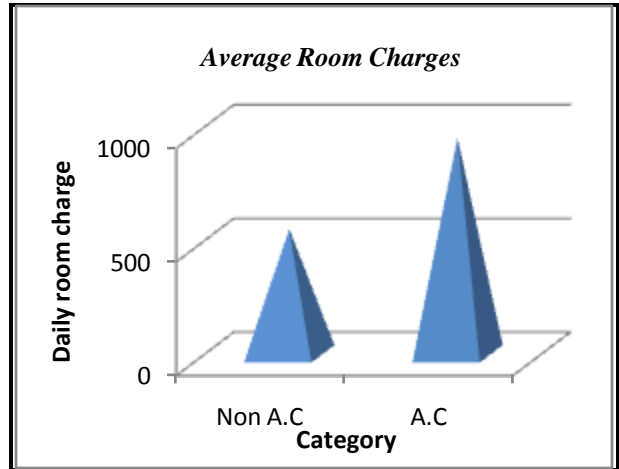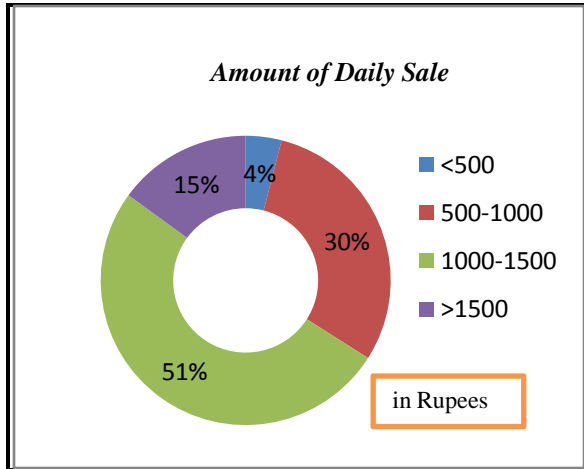
Market

There is a separate enclosure just before the main entrance to the temple where about 30-40 permanent shops sell all puja items like garlands and incense sticks etc. There are several shops (both permanent and street shops) outside the temple premises where a devotee can get the 'puja dala' consisting large red hibiscus garlands, incense sticks, sweets and vermilion.

Like the other religious tourist destinations, Dakshineshwar has several shops glittering with beautiful costume jewelleries, items of worship, pictures and idols of Dakshineshwar temple and goddess Kali. Coming back from the temple, one may come across many street shops, which sell a wide variety of curiosities. 'Fuchka' or Panipuri, 'Peda', the local sweets, toys, and small idols of Gods are sold in these shops. Handy models of Shiva Linga are the most sought after things in these shops. There is a good collection of conchs as well, in various hues, sizes and shapes. Pickle is another famous item of Dakshineswar. Many pickle shops are found beside Rani Rashmoni Road. At present all the shops of Rani Rashmoni Road are temporarily shifted TN Biswas Road, 200m away from the temple due to the construction of skywalk.

The survey report says that there are 30% shop of puja items followed by sweetmeat and food (23%) and costume jewellery (13%). The rest 34% is pickle and other shops. Most of the shops are newly established (1-10 years) and 23% is old shop. Most of shopkeepers (51%) told that their daily amount of sale is Rs.1000 to 1500. But during the peak season or festival the amount abruptly increases. The buyers are mainly visitors and tourists.

Types of The Shops

Amount of Daily Sale

- <500
- 500-1000
- 1000-1500
- >1500

in Rupees

**Average Room Charges**

Hotels

There are many low cost or budget hotels adjacent to the Kali Temple. Holy Nest Guest House is the well-known hotel of the area. Other hotels are Debalaya Guest Hose, Sonar Tari Guest House, Mandir Palace, The Camalia Guest House, Annapurna and Purnosree Guest House, Blue Heaven Guest House, Red Rose Guest House and Debojyoti Guest. Apart from Debalaya Guest House which was established in the year of 1908 all other hotels were built recently. All the hotels have private ownership. There is no hotel or lodge for the tourist in Adyapeath. Tourists staying at Dakshineswar visit Adyapeath, Ariadaha Patbari and adjacent religious spot.

Average income of the hotels is 6 lacs per annum. Most of the hotels have both AC and Non-AC rooms. Usual daily room charge is 550 for non-AC and 900 for AC room but it varies seasonally.

Types of Room
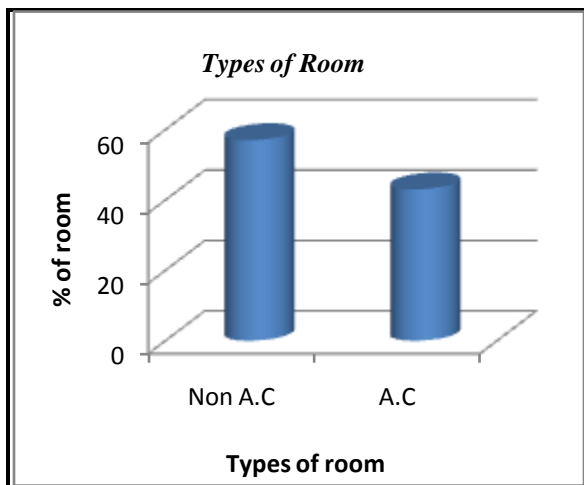
Eighty percent of the hotel owners are male and only twenty percent are female. As maximum hotels are low-priced, number of the permanent workers is also few (average 4 to 5 workers). Most of the workers are male. But in the peak season many local peopleare temporarily appointed in various hotel jobs like cook, sweeper, cleaner and room-boy. Thus the people who mostly belong in economically lower middle class can earn some extra money in this time.

Seasonal or temporary source of income

The local people are mainly engaged in various secondary activities. But the poor people are found to be engaged in various temporary jobs. Many unemployed youths are found as e-rickshaw (locally known as 'toto') and auto driver, hawker etc. They give service and sell puja items mainly to thevisitors. Consequently they can earn some money and the problem of seasonal unemployment may be solved to some extent.

Earlier it has been mentioned that all the shops beside Rani Rashmoni Road are temporarily shifted for skywalk project. Some local people rent out ground floor of their houses to the shopkeepers for the time being.The premises of some local clubs are being used as parking zone (by rent).

Major festivals

The temple complex is very clean, spacious, serene and quiet. The temple premises would be crowded with devotees on auspicious or special days, like famous Kalpataru Utsav, which celebrates on January 1 every year. Kalpataru Utsav commemorates the day on January 1, 1886 when his followers believe that Ramakrishna revealed himself to be an 'Avatar', or God incarnate on earth. Devotees from all over the

country thronged the Temple at Dakshineshwar. But it is surprising to see that it has lot more discipline in comparison to many other temples. There will be a queue. However, visitors won't get much time to see the deity and might be asked to move ahead very quickly.
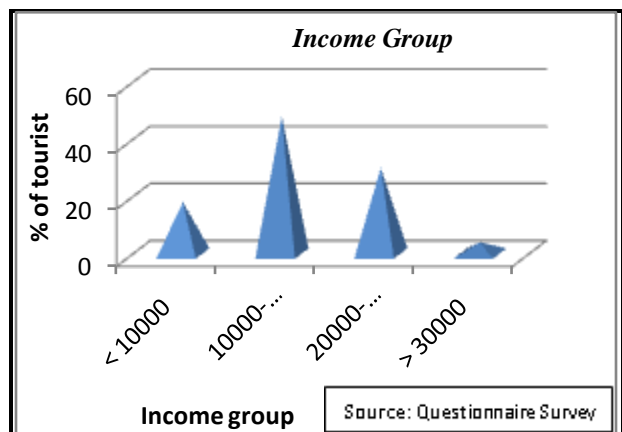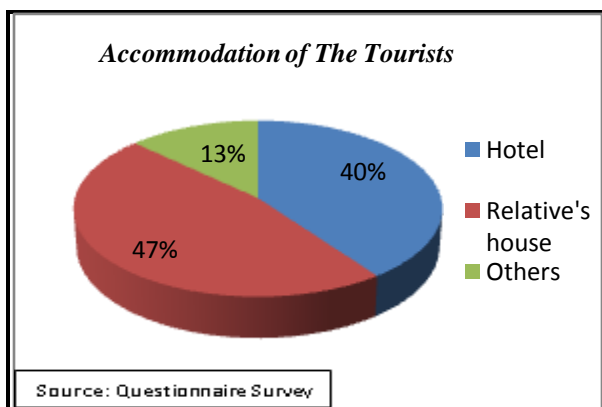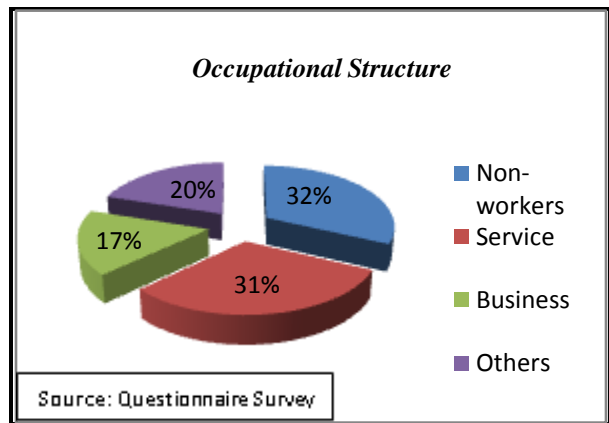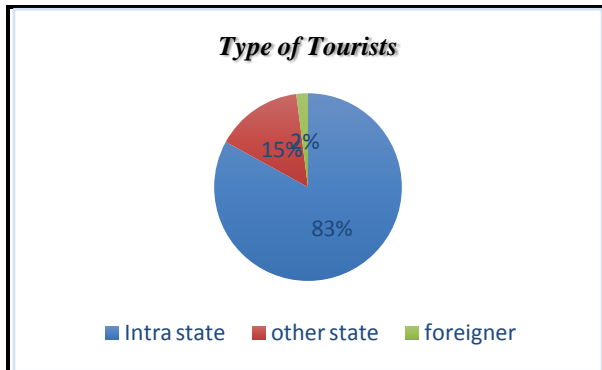
Daily pujas are performed in the traditional manner in Adyapeath Temple. Feeding the poor in the name of God is one of the principal activities of Dakshineswar Ramkrishna Sangha, Adyapeath. Food is distributed to approximately 300 to 500 people daily, irrespective of caste, color, and creed.

Tourist flow

Dakshineswar Kali Temple is one of the famous temples for the devotees. Flow of tourists, visitors and pilgrims are observed throughout the year but it is extreme in festive season. From tourist survey it is found that 83% of the tourists live in West Bengal and 15% comes from other states. Only 2% tourists are foreigner (fig. 7). Most of the Bengali tourists (56%) visited the place frequently. Majority of the tourists (39%) prefer train as mode of transport followed by bus (28%) and private car (27%). The tourists prefer local hotels for accommodation but a significant number of people visit the spot staying their relative's house.

Type of Tourists

Intra state • other state • foreigner

Accommodation of The Tourists

Hotel • Relative's house • Others

Source: Questionnaire Survey

If we consider demographic scenario, it is found that 80% of the tourists belong in 15-45 age group where 13% is aged people and 5% tourists are senior citizen. 93% of the tourists are Bengali speaking and rest 7% are non-Bengalis who are mainly Hindi speaking people. Almost 84% of the visitors belong in general caste and 16% are schedule caste, tribe and other backward class people.

More than 50% of the travellers are non-graduate. Few of them are highly qualified. According to survey report 32% of the tourists are non-workers which include mainly children, students and housewives. 31% of the tourists are engaged in service and 17% are self-employed. Majority of the tourists come from lower-middle class. Nearly 48% of the tourists have Rs. 10000 to 20000 monthly incomes. Only 4% tourists belong in high income group.

Occupational Structure

Non-workers • Service • Business • Others

Source: Questionnaire Survey

Income Group

Source: Questionnaire Survey

Just about cent per cent pilgrims cover Adyapeath with Dakshineswar at a time. More than fifty percent devotees include Belur Math in their sacred trail.

Environmental and Socio-Economic Problems

Pollution of Hugli River

West Bengal treats only 49 per cent of the waste water before dumping it in the Ganga, says a recent assessment report on the pollution in the river, prepared by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).Few locations in West Bengal (Dakshineshwar, Uluberia and Diamond Harbour), water quality exceeds the criteria and BOD is very high.

Mass bathing is frequently held in India. On certain religious occasions, special importance is assigned to it and a very large number of people take bath during a short period in specific stretches of rivers, lakes, tanks and sea coast.Water quality is severely affected by mass bathing. Deterioration of river water quality may injure health of the people taking the dip and also the population downstream who use the river as a source of water for drinking and bathing. Some materials like food, flower or leaves are left in the Ganga for ritualistic reasons. Dakshineswar as a religious tourist spot is not exceptional.

Narrow roads and traffic problem

Dakshineswar continues to draw huge numbers of devotees all around the year. In the earlier days, visiting by boat was one of the most preferred ways to reach the temple, and by road being the second. The approach road to the temple, that was once predominantly pedestrian, now has to cater to a growing vehicular traffic of private cars, taxis, two wheelers and goods vehicles. Increased footfalls over the years has brought in a lot of shops and kiosks catering to the visitors, offering Prasad, Puja material, embellishments for the deity and assorted food, sweets, snacks and tea stalls. Finding no other space to occupy, they built over the footpath, pushing pedestrians to the road, jostling for space with rickshaws and e-rickshaws, cars andgoods vehicles. Further, the approach road is extremely slow moving and congested during regular days and a logistics nightmare on festive days.

Problem of waterlogging and sewerage system

High tide of River Hugli causes waterlogging at low-laying areas like Rani Rashmoni Road, TN Biswas Road and the slum area of Railway colony mainly in rainy season. Recently the drains have been reconstructed but the sewerage system is not very satisfactory.

Major findings

Strengths and Opportunities

- Dakshineswar and Adyapeath have beautiful and scenic surroundings, cultural heritage as well as historicity.

- Religious character of the spot and holy Ganges (i.e. River Hugli) attract millions of pilgrims and tourists.

- There is a scope of developing religious tourism by promoting more cultural events.

- The best thing about this Kali temple is that anybody can offer Puja without being disturbed by pandas/priests unlike other temples.

Weakness and Threats

- Tourist infrastructure not able to support sudden swell of pilgrims and sudden influx of tourists leads to degradation of urban environment.

- Inadequate civic services for the tourists.

- Vehicular movement disrupted during the religious festive.

- The crowd inside the temple is difficult to manage.

Concluding statement

There are two distinct aspects to Religious Tourism in India; one, the faith of the domestic tourist, who has a spiritual attachment to the deity/destination in line with their religious beliefs; the other is the 'foreign' tourist, someone belonging to a different religion, region or country, for whom the destination and the religious practices have the dimension of 'novelty', a spiritual experience different from their own, despite the ethical values being delivered remaining the same. Many foreign tourists visit Dakshineswar to know Hindu culture as well as ideology of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

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