



## **Economic empowerment through rural tourism: The case of Tarapith – A religious tourism destination in Birbhum District of West Bengal, India**

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### **Abstract**

In developing countries like India rural tourism can be harnessed as a strategy for upgrading the quality of life of the rural poor. Although India is rich with potential tourism destinations distributed over remote corners of the country, due priority has not been given to strengthening the tourism infrastructure of these destinations so that they can attract domestic as well as international tourists. Yet, if properly managed, rural tourism can reduce the existing backwardness of the rural community by diversifying employment opportunities based on local tourism assets. In the present study of Tarapith – a religious tourism destination of the Birbhum district in West Bengal, an attempt was made to show the nature of economic empowerment that may be created through rural tourism. It was found that a significant impact of rural tourism upon local community was perceived by the local people.

**Keywords:** backwardness, employment opportunities, quality of life, religious tourism destination, rural community, rural tourism

### **Introduction**

Nowadays, tourism is a booming and fastest growing industry next to the oil and jewellery industry. Since most of the top tourism destinations in India including eco-tourism and cultural as well as heritage tourism sites situated in rural areas, priority has been given to promote rural tourism for a sustainable development of country's tourism industry. Local communities can be benefited through huge employment opportunities created by well developed tourism industry. Indian tourism industry contributes 6.23% to the National GDP and provides direct and indirect employment to 6.4% of the total employees (WTTC-2009). If properly managed, tourism can establish itself as a growth pole from which development impulses trickle down towards the backward area of a region encompassing tourism potentialities. Rural tourism can upgrade the quality of life of significant portion of the poor people reside in rural areas lacking from basic requisites like food, cloth and shelter. Thus, the challenging task of the local authority is to develop the tourism infrastructure of rural area which is in worse condition comparatively from that of urbanised tourist destinations.

West Bengal, the 'epitome of India' offers immense potentialities of tourism with its rich cultural heritage, historical heritage, flora and fauna, fabulous beaches, high rise mountains and wildlife's. Only a few states in India show such type of advent position regarding tourism development (Banerjee et.al. 2011). Birbhum district of West Bengal is well known for its rich cultural heritage that has been rendered through various religious temples in the scenic country side. Birbhum attracts devotees for in situ SAKTIPITHAS (SAKTI – the mother goddess-a female creative force; PITHAS means seat) which connects itself to the mythology (Chakraborty et.al. 2008). Tarapith is the legendary SAKTIPITHAS of Birbhum whose ethnicity draws devotees round the year. Based on holy temple of Maa Tara various earning opportunities has been generated in Tarapith which accelerates the economic development of its surroundings as well as the whole Birbhum district.

The objectives of the present study are twofold, namely, to find out the relevance of tourism industry in the light of the present socio-economic condition of the Birbhum district, and to evaluate the potential of economic empowerment of the study area through rural tourism.

## Materials and method

### *The study area*

The study area Tarapith is one of the rich religious tourist spot of West Bengal situated in Birbhum district. According to Census-2001, the district has the population of 3015422 with a relatively lower density of population (663/sq. km.) than the state average (903/sq. km.). There are 19 blocks in the district, distributed over 3 sub-divisions, viz. Rampurhat, Sadar and Bolpur. Tarapith is situated in Tarapur village under Rampurhat-I block of Rampurhat sub-division. The village is located between 24° 7' to 24° 6' north latitudes and 87° 48' to 87° 47' east longitudes covering an area of about 305 sq. km.



Source: Wikipedia (without scale)

### *Methodology*

To assess the economic development in the study area emphasis has been given on field survey. Study method hence included primary data collected based on personal interviews and questionnaires. Out of 807 households 160 (20% sample) have been selected randomly to gauge the economic implications of tourism in the study area. In addition, to assess the status of employment opportunities, a survey of 20% sample respondents was conducted among persons involved in various income generating activities associated with tourism.

Secondary data were obtained from the Human Development Report of West Bengal and Birbhum district. In the post field stage procured data were analysed using descriptive statistical technique and Chi-square test. Based on extensive study of the religious spot within the framework of rural tourism the following hypotheses have been made regarding the local people's perception:

1. Is there any relation between rural tourism and employment opportunities in the study area?

2. Is there any relation between rural tourism and income level of the people?
3. Is rural tourism offering employment opportunities more to local people than outsiders?
4. Is rural tourism ensuring all round year earning opportunities than agriculture and related sectors?
5. Is there any relation between rural tourism and female employment opportunities in the study area?

## Results and discussion

### *Relevance of rural tourism in the Birbhum District*

Tourism is an industry that provides long term employment opportunities to the community of its surroundings. Sustainable management of this industry can ameliorate economical condition of larger section of people lacking from proper employment opportunities and low levels of development. Birbhum district of West Bengal posses a distinctive socio-economic situation lacking from proper economic opportunities. Following are some indicators showing the present scenario of the district which queries for remedial action that can only be provided by well managed tourism industry.

### *Low per capita income*

Per capita income is a significant parameter determining the economic situation of a region. Birbhum district is far behind from the state average in terms of per capita income. Between the year 1997-98 and 2003-04 the compound growth rate in per capita income in the district is 4.3 per cent per year while it is 5.4 per cent for West Bengal. Rural tourism can aid to rise in per capita income by generating simultaneous employment for both skilled and unskilled.

### *Less shares in secondary and tertiary sector*

Agriculture is the predominant occupational activity that contributes larger portion in net domestic product of Birbhum. Table 1 shows that the primary sector of district is in better position than the state average. Due to absence of any large and medium scale industries the secondary sector has experienced a deplorable condition comparatively with state average. Although tertiary sector exhibits a faster growth throughout state, the pace of progress is quite slow in Birbhum district.

**Table 1. Sectoral shares (%) in Net District Domestic Product of Birbhum and Net State Domestic Product of West Bengal at constant prices**

Year	Birbhum			WB		
	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
1999-00	45.08	10.86	44.06	29.75	21.29	48.96
2000-01	40.87	12.07	47.06	28.73	20.51	50.76
2001-02	43.75	11.51	44.74	29.62	20	50.38
2002-03	40.41	11.11	48.48	26.44	19.65	53.91
2003-04(P)	38.51	10.93	50.56	25.61	19.03	55.36

Source: Statistical Abstract 2005, Govt. of West Bengal

Tourism industry that has already grown in the district based on cultural heritage resource can ensure the larger net domestic product in secondary sector. It also generates backward linkages towards the development of tertiary sector.

### *Adverse geo-physical condition for agricultural development*

Although agriculture is the sole earning opportunity of the people of Birbhum, the present adverse geo-physical conditions restrict its further development. A long tract of the district is characterised by undulating topography flanked by Chotonagpur plateau situated in western border side. Most of the

soil belongs to partial fertile lateritic groups. Ajoy and Mayurakshi, the two important river of this region are non-perennial in nature originating from Chotonagpur plateau drains the district. Canal irrigation from Tilpara barrage at Mayurakshi provides adequate source of water in summer time when all the rivers are dried up. Hence the productivity and diversity of agricultural crop is limited that confines the district only to regional cereal crop i.e. paddy.

*Occupational structure of the study area*

Table 2 depicts the nature of work participation in the district. In terms of work participation rates the district remains slightly higher position (37.4%) than the state average (36.8 percent). Although the district has made above 4 percentage increase in total work participation rates from Census 1991 to 2001, the female work participation (19.7%) is still lower than the male (54.3%). For better societal condition it is necessary to ensure the higher female work participation that can decrease overall dependency ratio. Multidimensional employment opportunities provided through tourism can ensure more female employees in secondary and tertiary sector of economy.

**Table 2. Comparative work participation rates in Birbhum and West Bengal**

	% of workers in total population	1991			2001		
		Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female
Birbhum	Main + Marginal	33.2	52.2	12.8	37.4	54.3	19.7
	Main	30.4	51.6	8.1	27.6	46.1	8.1
West Bengal	Main + Marginal	32.2	51.4	11.3	36.8	54	18.3
	Main	30.2	50.7	8	28.7	47	9.1

Source: Census of India, 1991 & 2001

*Alarming poverty of the district*

Indian Rural Development Report, 1999 categorized the state of West Bengal as one of the poverty prone state in India. There is a huge inter and intra district variation of poverty resulting from uneven economic viability is seen in West Bengal. Birbhum is no such aloof where a 42.3 percent household

**Table3. Percentage of Below Poverty Line (BPL) households in blocks of Birbhum**

Blocks	Percentage of BPL households
MAYURESWAR - II	40.6
NALHATI - I	42.8
RAJNAGAR	25.3
SURI - I	28.2
NANOOR	34.7
LABHPUR	28.3
MURARAI - I	50.2
NALHATI - II	56.3
RAMPURHAT - II	53.7
DUBRAJPUR	35.5
SURI - II	50.6
SAINTHIA	31.9
<b>RAMPURHAT - I</b>	<b>53.9</b>
KHOYRASOL	36.9
BOLPUR-SRINIKETAN	38.6
MAYURESWAR - I	39.8
ILLAMBAZAR	35.6
MOHAMMAD BAZAR	35.3
MURARAI - II	78
<b>BIRBHUM</b>	<b>42.3</b>

Source: Human Development Report, Birbhum

lay under poverty line. Table 3 portrays the spatial pattern of poverty distributed among several blocks of Birbhum. Rampurhat-I block (in which the study area Tarapith is situated) has 53.9 percent people are under BPL category. The neighbouring block Rampurhat-II is also in a deplorable condition having 53.7 percent households below the poverty line (BPL). For the betterment of the entire socio-economic condition of the people of Birbhum it is necessary to utilize the potential base of religious tourism orbiting Tarapith.

*Human Development Index*

Apart from the precedent indicator, West Bengal Human Development Report (2004) also shows a poor condition of the district (Table 4) that justifies the said condition of the region. In terms of HDI and GDI the district of Birbhum ranks 14<sup>th</sup> out of 17 districts in the state. Among the three indicators of HDI if income index is separately treated, it is clean chit that Birbhum is in worst condition (0.27) just before the Purulia having the value of income index 0.18. Low GDI value (0.435) reflects the low work force participation which is an indicative broader of restriction to women’s economic participation as well as empowerment of them.

**Table 4. Human and Gender Development Indices for Birbhum vis-a-vis other Districts of West Bengal**

Districts	Health Index	Income Index	Education Index	HDI	HDI Rank	GDI	Rank
Darjeeling	0.73	0.49	0.72	0.65	4	0.600	2
Jalpaiguri	0.61	0.38	0.6	0.53	10	0.492	11
Cooch Behar	0.5	0.41	0.65	0.52	11	0.471	13
Dinajpur	0.62	0.39	0.53	0.51	13	0.478	12
Malda	0.49	0.36	0.48	0.44	17	0.416	17
Murshidabad	0.57	0.29	0.52	0.46	15	0.423	16
<b>Birbhum</b>	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.27</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>0.47</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>0.435</b>	<b>14</b>
Bardhaman	0.74	0.47	0.71	0.64	5	0.560	7
Nadia	0.65	0.41	0.66	0.57	9	0.506	9
North 24 Parganas	0.72	0.49	0.76	0.66	3	0.564	6
Hugli	0.77	0.46	0.67	0.63	6	0.581	3
Bankura	0.67	0.26	0.62	0.52	11	0.494	10
Purulia	0.61	0.18	0.55	0.45	16	0.424	15
Medinipur	0.68	0.45	0.74	0.62	7	0.578	4
Haora	0.77	0.53	0.75	0.68	2	0.570	5
Kolkata	0.82	0.73	0.8	0.78	1	0.642	1
South 24 Parganas	0.71	0.4	0.68	0.6	8	0.521	8
<b>West Bengal</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>0.61</b>		<b>0.549</b>	

Source: West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004

After a detailed analysis of the issues relating to economic development as well as women economic empowerment it is evident that the livelihood of rural people of Birbhum is under a vulnerable condition. Although agricultural activities remain the sole employment opportunity of the people of the district they failed to provide better human development as mention earlier. Existing Integrated Rural Development Planning (IRDP) like MGNREGS, JRY and SGSRY does not synchronize the development potential also. In this juncture, the question arises – what would be the solution for economic development of the district? Based upon the potentials of rural tourism sites of the district, alternative economic opportunities can be created through which may benefit the rural people to a large extent. Birbhum district has long enjoyed a great reputation for its cultural tourism sites. In recent times, the district has experienced a deflection in its net domestic products towards tertiary from primary sector which indicates the progressive step for tourism development. The present study area of Tarapith is rich with alternative employment potentials. This includes the huge scope for developing cultural tourism attractions that can change the present scenario of the district. Therefore a holistic approach should be incorporated enabling a large section of rural people to participate in income generating opportunities of the tourism industry and prosper the whole district.

### **Economic empowerment through rural tourism in Tarapith**

Table 5 shows the views of the local people regarding additional employment opportunities created through tourism industry at the study area. Almost 80 percent respondents opine that the effects of rural tourism are very high (61 percent) and high (19 percent) in creating employment opportunities for a large number of people. Only 8 percent people cast their opinion in respects of very low effects. Visitors mainly come here with a purpose for earn virtue by offering *puja* to *Maa Tara*. Hence, a continuous flow of tourists has been seen throughout the year. Based upon the demand of tourists various types of business activities are initiated in Tarapith which together form an industry that occupy the people in rural livelihood. The field survey upon employee of tourism sector reveals the distributional pattern of total employee in various types of activities associated with tourism at the study area. Well developed accommodation facilities are the basic concern of the tourists visiting any tourism destination. Tarapith is well known for its better accommodation facilities. Including 81 hotels/lodges ranking from single star to three star categories there are near about 1400 small and medium hotels providing accommodation. More than 25 percent of the total employees involved in this sector are either permanent or temporary staff (during peak months). To provide clean and hygienic meal to the visitors various restaurants and catering organizations have been emerged providing 15 percent employment of the concerned area. There is a huge demand for offering materials mainly flowers, incense sticks, *sindur*, *alta*, sweets in Tarapith. Almost 20 percent of the total employee engage themselves in such shops providing the aforesaid materials and earn their livelihoods. Tarapith is situated in a pocket route, 6 km. away from Rampurhat - the nearby sub-divisional town and connected with it by means of both public and private transport facilities. Near about 10 percent employment is come from this transport sector. As the study area is a concerned religious tourist spot devoid of any reputed handicraft products like the Bolpur – Santiniketan in Birbhum, there is less demand for souvenir products. Hence minimum employment (5 percent) is experienced in souvenir shops situated in the region. Immense employment has been observed in the form of locally called *Panda*, through whom the devotees pray to *Maa Tara*. Near about 15 percent people earn their livelihoods by means of *Panda*. The rest 10 percent employment comes from tourism related miscellaneous activities like guard and managerial works of temple, floriculture farms provide flowers of temple and van & rickshaw pulling activities etc.

**Table 5. Impact of rural tourism on employment opportunities**

Impact of rural tourism on employment opportunities	Observed frequency distribution	Percentage	Expected frequency distribution	Remaining
Very low	8	5.00	32	-24
Low	11	6.88	32	-21
Medium	14	8.75	32	-18
High	30	18.75	32	-2
Very high	97	60.63	32	+65
Total	160	100.00		

Table 6 portrays the choice of sample respondents in respect of tourism impact on income level of people. More than 61 and 21 percent respondent opined that the impact of rural tourism on income level is very high and high respectively. Besides only 4 and 6 percent people think that tourism has very low and low impact respectively on income level of employee at the study area. The study regarding monthly income of the employees attached with tourism reveals that more than 40 percent people earn an amount of Rs.4001 – 6000 followed by 35 percent at the group of Rs.6001 – 10000 and 20 percent belonging to Rs.10001 – 20000 monthly income group. The rest 5 percent people are mainly owners of star category hotel that has a huge concentration at the study area or land merchant, earn a huge lung some amount of more than Rs.50, 000/month.

**Table 6. Impact of rural tourism on income level of people**

Impact of rural tourism on income level	Observed frequency distribution	Percentage	Expected frequency distribution	Remaining
Very low	6	3.75	32	-26
Low	9	5.63	32	-23
Medium	13	8.13	32	-19
High	34	21.25	32	+2
Very high	98	61.25	32	+66
Total	160			

As per Table 7, 58 and 23 percent people opined that the rural tourism developed in Tarapith has ensured very high and high involvement of local people respectively rather the outsiders come from another district or state. On the other side, a very few people (6 and 8 percent respectively) is on behalf of very low and low impact of tourism on involvement of local resident. During field study the people of Birbhum and adjoining blocks of Murshidabad to Tarapith like Khargram and Kandi are treated as ‘local’. The rest employee come from various corner of the state as well as the country are considered as ‘outsider’. Such active participation of local people can lead to community development via rural tourism.

**Table 7. Impact of rural tourism on involvement of local people vis-a-vis outsider**

Impact of rural tourism on involvement of local people	Observed frequency distribution	Percentage	Expected frequency distribution	Remaining
Very low	9	5.63	32	-23
Low	12	7.5	32	-20
Medium	10	6.25	32	-22
High	37	23.13	32	+5
Very high	92	57.5	32	+60
Total	160			

Table 8 depicts a clear picture about the local people views regarding the impact of rural tourism in providing all round year earning opportunities than predominant agricultural and other allied activities practiced in and around the study area. About 54 and 21 percent people respectively think that rural tourism causes very high and high impact on ensuring better earning opportunities than



agriculture and other allied sectors. Keeping a slight hesitation, 9 and 6 percent people respectively cast their vote in favour of very low and low impact regarding such livelihood opportunities.

**Table 8. Impact of rural tourism in providing all round year earning opportunities than agriculture and allied sectors**

Impact of rural tourism on providing all round year earning opportunities than agriculture and allied sectors	Observed frequency distribution	Percentage	Expected frequency distribution	Remaining
Very low	15	9.38	32	-17
Low	10	6.25	32	-22
Medium	16	10.00	32	-16
High	33	20.63	32	+1
Very high	86	53.75	32	+54
Total	160			

Table 9 portrays the impact of tourism on creating female employment opportunities at the study area. More than 46 and 18 percent sample respondents respectively support on behalf of very high and high effects of rural tourism on accelerating the female employment opportunities. Still, 12 and 13 percent people believe that rural tourism has very low and low effects regarding female employment opportunities. Since the district of Birbhum has been far behind in Gender Development Index (G.D.I. Rank – 14), women economic empowerment through rural tourism has a significant importance in the present socio-economic condition.

**Table 9. Impact of rural tourism on female employment opportunities**

Impact of rural tourism on female employment opportunities	Observed frequency distribution	Percentage	Expected frequency distribution	Remaining
Very low	19	11.88	32	-13
Low	21	13.13	32	-11
Medium	17	10.63	32	-15
High	29	18.13	32	-3
Very high	74	46.25	32	+42
Total	160			

At the length, the obtained value of chi square (Table 10) justifies significant impact of rural tourism based upon the so called religious tourism destination Tarapith in bringing out the economic empowerment at the whole study area as well as surroundings. Rural tourism has laid upon a positive impact on the selected criteria, viz. employment opportunities, income level of people, all round year earning opportunities than agriculture and other allied sectors, female employment opportunities etc. representing the overall economic scenario of the area under concern. For that reason, the calculated value of chi square for all the aforesaid parameters at significant level of 0.05 and degree of freedom 4 is so much higher than the table value of 9.488 which rejected null hypothesis and accepted alternate hypothesis.



**Table 10. Non-parametric Chi square tests to judge the significance/non-significance between variables**

	Employment opportunities	Income level	Involvement of local people vis-a-vis outsider	Earning opportunities than agriculture and allied sectors	Female employment opportunities
Chi Square ( $\chi^2$ )	174.07	185.2	157.44	123.32	71.5
Degree of Freedom (n-1)	4	4	4	4	4
Table value at the significant level of 0.05	9.488	9.488	9.488	9.488	9.488
Remarks	Null hypothesis rejected	Null hypothesis rejected	Null hypothesis rejected	Null hypothesis rejected	Null hypothesis rejected

### Conclusion and recommendations

After a detail analysis of employment infrastructure based on the religious site – Tarapith, it is clear that rural tourism based on a single site can boom the economic development process of a region where other sources of employment are inadequate and insecure. Since tourism offers employment opportunity for both skilled and unskilled, there are immense opportunities to engage the local rural people lacking from any adequate literacy level and work experience. In recent times, the Indian Government gave much importance on rural development including employment generation and poverty alleviation in the lines of Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP). Concerning the present situation of rural tourism developed in Tarapith, a portion of money executed for IRDP program like MGNREGS can be expanded for developing the rural tourism infrastructure in situ. For accelerating the human development process in the district of Birbhum which remains in a poor condition, it is necessary to adopt the potentialities of tourism industry that ensure better output in the form of economic opportunities of the host community of tourism destination without having much more investment like other industries. A proposed tourism circuit connecting Bolpur, Bakreshwar and Nalhati, includes Tarapith which opens the scope for the growth of graphiti of rural tourism in the study area in the coming future.

Regarding the present scenario of rural religious tourism developed at Tarapith, the following recommendations may contribute to the sustaining of the tourism industry developed there:

- Tarapith, being a religious tourism destination, mainly attracts the domestic tourists. Consequently, it is important to render the services based upon the demand and spending capacity of local tourists. Beside private accommodation, low cost government. accommodation facilities should be developed.
- Environmental suitability is a pre-requisite. The Dwarka river flowing through Tarapith is in a dire state as a result of pollution from ghat burning and sewage of hotels which need immediate attention of the local authority. In addition, during peak seasons severe pollution from tourists exceed the environment limit of tolerance there.
- To attain more tourism benefits for the rural poor it is necessary to introduce the concept of Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT) that can increase the participation of local communities in managing the tourism products. This is most pertinent for a region like Birbhum where a large number of people lives below the poverty line.

- Finally, the development of tourism infrastructure like transport facilities, souvenir products, and quality accommodation is imperative. Besides government initiatives it is necessary to apply the PPP (Public – Private Partnership) model to maintain the infrastructural base and sustain tourism development at Tarapith.

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