Tourism Circuit Development in Peripheral Destinations: Case of Tripura, India

Supriya Dam*

Abstract:

Amongst the tourism circuits in Tripura, West-South Tourism Circuits (WSTC) are the most revered tourist routes in the state situated in the North East Region (NER) of India. The circuit usually offers tourism products like archaeological/heritage, pilgrimage and eco-tourism for its promotion in the industrially backward state. In recent times, the WSTC has shown signs of improvement in terms of demand for and supply of tourism support services than ever before. The circuit accounts for the highest number of tourist influx in the last fifteen years or so and also is rated as the best tourism circuit in Tripura; especially when it concerns domestic tourist influx. Recently, South-East Asia sub-regional cooperation like Bay of Bengal Initiatives for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar (BCIM) and also Kolkata to Kunming (K2K) initiatives have opened the door for this landlocked bordering state to exert renewed emphasis on tourism sector. Again, in spite of potentials, the state failed to attract foreign tourists which are reflected by tourism statistics of Tripura for the last twenty years or so. In light of such developments, the paper explores potentialities of international tourism circuit development in the state of Tripura.

* Assistant Professor, Commerce, Govt. Degree College, Dharmanagar, Assam, India; mrsupriya7dam@gmail.com

Introduction:

Circuit tourism, over the years, has been termed differently by authors like 'route tourism,' 'corridor tourism,' 'cluster tourism' etc. A 'tourist circuit' is a route with at least three major tourist attractions such that their locations are not in the same town/village/city. Instead, they are located close to each other and entry and exit of such route are well defined in such a way that tourists are encouraged to visit all of them if one of them is visited (MOT: 2012a). Cullinan et al (1977 as mentioned in Chowdhury, 2011) describe it as 'a pleasure trip which includes two or more countries by a resident of a third country.' Circuit tourism is typified by the short length of stay at each destination on the circuit, pre-planned itinerary and regional and local clustering of attractions (Chowdhury, 2011). Prasad and Sundari (2012) have referred it as 'clusters of tourist attractions mainly aimed at attracting more tourists' and extending their stay in the destination.' Circuit tourism depends, for its existence, on the identification, development, and promotion of tourist circuits. Circuits can be developed either within a country (intra-border) or between two or more countries (cross-border). Cross-bordercircuits could be based on various themes or effective transport connectivity (Sisodia, 2011). Circuit tourism needs careful planning in smallest detail. It will also require development of proper support system at various locations along the circuit route; and provides an opportunity to involve local people in the tourism development process (DoT, 2003).

Amongst the tourism circuits in Tripura, the WSTC commands highest domestic tourist influx in the state. WSTC which consists cities/towns like the state capital Agartala, Sipahijala, Tripureswari Temple (Matabari), Pilak, Rudrasagar, etc. also commands highest tourist inflows in Tripura. In comparison to Agra-Braj circuit, tourism infrastructural facilities, except Agra city, are quite similar to each other in both the circuits. Recent reports reveal that Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Mathura, Vrindaban have already been saturated and exceeded their carrying capacity limits (MoT, 2012a); a threat

to sustainability of the circuit. This presents an opportunity for the other Indian States' to draw foreign tourists from established tourism circuits like Agra-Braj for development of tourism in respective states.' The state of Tripura has the potential to draw foreign tourists' from established tourism circuits because of its inheritance of heritage/pilgrimage/ecotourism products on the one hand and common boundary with Mizoram, Assam and neighbouring country Bangladesh on the other.

Objectives:

The basicobjective of the study is to assess the prospect of international tourist influx in Tripura in general and WSTC in particular. The objectives of the study are:

- Conduct an in-depth analysis of tourism circuits in Tripura;

- Examine the operational characteristics of circuit tourism development in India with a view to apply it for circuit development in the state; and

- Explore the gaps and opportunities of WSTC and suggest ways and means of promoting international tourist influx in the state.

Methodology:

The study is based on secondary data. The data on the pattern and volume of circuit tourism have been collected from different sources i.e. articles, reports, books, newspapers, internet documents, etc. Because of the nature of the study, collection of primary data of any sort has been kept out of consideration. The collected data are processed and analyzed by using suitable statistical tools as per the need of the study.

The framework of the paper starts with introduction of tourism circuits on tourist inflow, geographical positioning and number of tourism sites followed by a literature survey. The third portion of the study comprises of an inventory of tourism circuits in Tripura with special emphasis on WSTC. In the next portion, key circuit development parameters are verified against available data for the state of Tripura. Lastly, the study analyses prospect of drawing

FTAs from Kolkata (West Bengal) and neighbouring country Bangladesh and propose suitable strategies for workable tourism circuits in the state.

Review of Literature:

In recent times, literature on tourism circuits' have been confined to tourism reports, plans, master plans and policy decisions in majority of the tourism practising countries. It hardly finds a place in the intellectual discourse of tourism experts all over the world. Naturally, little literature has thrown light upon the development and promotion of tourism circuits.

Riyanto et al. (2008) have reported that Bali International Circuit is a plan to build an international circuit in Indonesia. The study concluded that the design process of the circuit must comply with standard international circuits so that it can lift the image of the country abroad. Mandal and Das (2012) have noted that the Alipurduar Tourism Circuit (ATC) in West Bengal, India developed as a spontaneous result of preference of tourists' visiting Eastern Dooars region. As tourism infrastructure is underdeveloped in adjoining places, tourists' are bound to stay at Alipurduar for night halt and other services.

The phase of route tourism development identified by Lourens (2007) includes identification of routes based on the target market and its requirement, audit of tourism products in the designated area, scrutinising tourism assets and identification of unique selling features. In the next step, developing the product mix by Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), clear strategy to direct work plan and lastly, branding of the route.

Madhekar and Haq (2012) argued that spiritual tourism circuit promoted throughout India, based on all religious themes, will be fruitful tooptimize inbound tourism in India. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, promotes pilgrimage tourism circuits in the form of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Sufi and the Sarva Dharma Circuits. Emphasis was given in the twelfth five-year plan (2013-17) to promote the many spiritual tourism destinations.

International tourism is susceptible to poor tourism infrastructure, unsteady flow of information and bad press publicity. Man and Ravas (2013) outlined the importance of a steady flow of information amongst the service providers for successful tourism development. Intense competition for overseas tourists' especially with other countries offering similar products affects tourism sector performance (Mariki et al., 2011). In recent years, countries have started examining the notion of cross-border regional (supranational) cooperation especially in areas of economic development, trade, human mobility and political stability. As a result, since the middle of the twentieth century, several supranational alliances have been created with an aim to decrease the barrier effect of political boundaries primarily in trade terms. Many of these alliances have also begun to branch into other areas of human welfare and economic development, including cross-border migration, education, environmental conservation and tourism.

Studies have outlined the importance of sub-regional economic grouping with South East Asian nations and linking it to North East India for the promotion of tourism among others. The region's endeavor to establish much-needed corridor between India's North East (NE) as a bridge to South East Asia for economic cooperation and to make it a hub for trade and commerce as well as a popular destination (Ryngnga, 2011). The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh,China, India, Myanmar (BCIM) and Kolkata to Kunming (K2K) initiatives, being sub-regional groupings, share two common countries (i.e. Myanmar and Bangladesh) and pass through predominantly three NESs, namely Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur. Tourism is one of the focus areas of BIMSTEC and BCIM and also for India represents another opportunity to extract mileage for its Look East Policy (LEP) through cooperation with Myanmar to develop North East Region as a tourist destination (Sharma & Rathore, 2015). Under such circumstances, Bangladesh could play a critical role by providing easy passage to global markets. All the countries could gain tremendously from an integrated transport network which would boost trade and investment through reduction of transportation cost. The present

research highlights the plight of tourism circuit development in Tripura with a particular emphasis on the WSTC.

West-South Tripura Circuit:

A former princely state, Tripura is landlocked in its south, west and northern frontier having 856-kilometer long international border with our neighboring country Bangladesh. In the eastern side, the state is connected to rest of North Eastern States' (NESs) of Assam and Mizoram through a thin strip of land. Tourism circuits in Tripura are categorized into two circuits, namely, West-North Tripura Circuit (WNTC) and WSTC. The WNTC essentially covers tourism spots in and around the capital city of Agartala, Jampui Hills, Unakoti,etc. while the WSTC covers Agartala, Sipajala, Gomti, Tripureswari Temple (Matabari), Buddhist Archeological Centre Pilaketc. Agartala possesses picturesque low hills on the three sides and plains opening to the adjoining Bangladesh on the other. The city derives its royal and historiccharacter due to the presence of palaces, temples, gardens, impressive public buildings, archways, and many small historical features. The city is also dotted with beautiful lakes and ponds. The royal splendor of Agartala, a heritage conservation project, usually draws a number of tourists' in this capital city.

The state has over 60 per cent of the geographical area under forest cover, out of which about 6 percent of the area is protected in the form of four wildlife sanctuaries. The typical topography and demography of the State, with a sizeable tribal people from nineteen communities of varied traditions and culture, presents an opportunity for promotion of ecotourism in the State. Seven parallel hill ranges clothed with forests of varying density and an equal number of major rivers dotting the valley with adjoining hill ranges, and tribal hamlets provide a perfect landscape for tourists with different tastes and preferences. An innumerable low altitude trekking route that marks the area can draw adventure loving tourists' to venture out for trekking.

Archaeological excavations at Boxnagar in Sonamura subdivision of West Tripura has unearthed a large Buddhist complex, including relics of a stupa, teaching centre and a bronze image of Lord Buddha and seals in Brahmi script, triggering a controversy over

the history of the state. However, it presents an opportunity for Buddhist pilgrims to visit Tripura.

Sipahijala Wildlife Sanctuary is located in the western part of Tripura under Bishalgarh subdivision of West Tripura District and about 28 kilometres away from the capital town of Agartala. It is an ideal place for biodiversity conservation covering an area of 18.53 square kilometre. The main attraction of the sanctuary is nature interpretation centre, eco-village with tree house accommodation, high rise watch tower, eco-park and children joyride, exotic zoo animals, picnic spot, botanical garden and lake view resort.

Udaipur, the first capital of Tripura, is famous for its temples, particularly the Tripureswari Temple, one of the 51 pithas recorded in Hindu Puranas. There are other ancient temples like Bhubaneswari Temple, Gunabati Group of Temples, Mahadev Temple,etc. However, the other significant character of the city is its large lakes and Gomti River, the holiest river in Tripura. Some of the famous large lakes are Amar Sagar, Jagannath Dighi, Dhani Sagar, MahadevDighi,etc. The nearby features of tourist interest are Neermahal and Rudrasagar, Devtamura Sculptures, Gomti Wildlife Sanctuary,etc.

Tepania Eco-park is located in Udaipur subdivision, 47 kilometres from Agartala and 5 kilometresfrom Udaipur. This park is equipped with the rare orchid house, unique tree houses, tented accommodations, watch tower, hanging bridge, picnic block,etc. The Kamalasagar International Centre for tourism history, culture, spirituality and health care is located in West Tripura District 27 km away from Agartala on the India-Bangladesh border. Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary is situated at Joychandpur in Belonia subdivision 95 kilometres from Agartala and 15 kilometres from Belonia. It covers an area of 194.70 square kilometres.

Pilak is a crucial archaeological site, situated on the eastern side of the South Tripura District about 100 kilometres from Agartala. Some terra-cotta temple plaques and seal with depiction of the stupa and Buddhist creed have also been collected from Pilakpathar (stone). Tripura has a rich cultural heritage of music, fine arts, handicrafts and dance. Music is an integral part of the

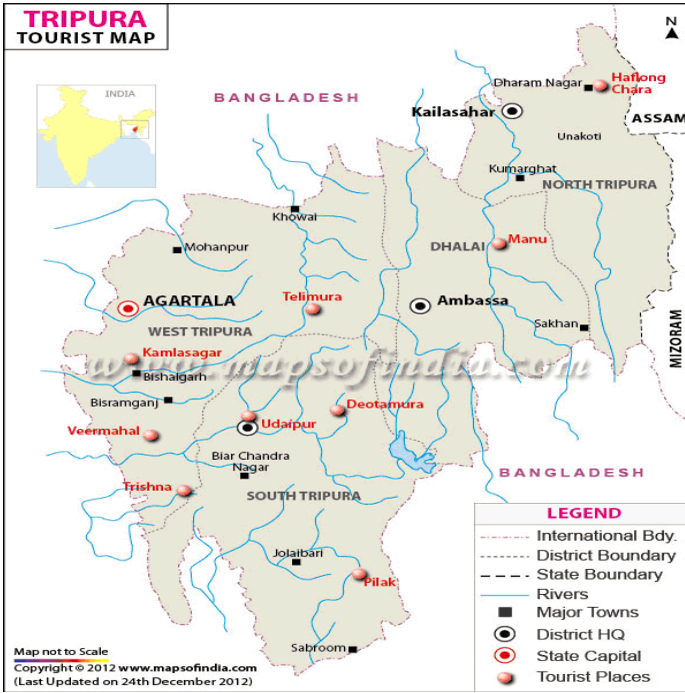tribal people of Tripura. Around 19 tribes reside in Tripura that constitute acultural variety of the state.

Fig.5 Tourist Map of Tripura

Table: 1 Inflow of tourists in Tripura from 2008-14

Year	Domestic tourist	Foreign	Total tourist	Revenue earned Rs)
2008-09	2,45,745	3,410	2,49,155	64.66
2009-10	3,20,931	4,763	3,25,694	106.50
2010-11	3,54,006	5,290	3,59,296	158.75
2011-12	3,59,731	6,550	3,66,281	188.87
2012-13	3,58,625	7,817	3,66,442	168.50
2013-14	3,33,369	13,584	3,46,953	193.69

Source: Directorate of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, Govt. of Tripura.

The above table indicates inflow of domestic and foreign tourist visiting Tripura during 2008-14. The Hotel and Restaurant Enterprise Survey 1999 reveals that the state of Tripura has 5172 own account enterprises, 3634 establishments, and ranked third amongst NESs after Assam and Meghalaya.

Seasonality of Tourist Inflow: An analysis of seasonality of tourist inflow in Tripura during 2009-10 to 2011-12 suggest that the maximum tourist arrivals, both domestic and foreign, was recorded in the month of October, primarily because of favourable weather conditions for sightseeing and the annual festiveseason. The months of December, November and January follows it in descending order. The months of July and August recorded minimum inflow of tourists because of the rainy season in this part North East India.

Origin of Tourist Inflow: The origins of domestic and foreign tourists visiting Tripura are not usually recorded. However, officials from the state tourism department divulge that FTAs comprise mainly from Bangladesh, Nepal, China, Canada, Germany, UK, USA, Netherland,etc. A Recent study has revealed that majority of the domestic tourist surveyed are local citizens only (51 percent), while from the remaining 10 percent came from North India, 17 percent from East India, 10 percent from West India and 3 per cent from South India. The rest 9 per cent of the tourist surveyed were foreigners mainly from Bangladesh and Nepal (Meena and Das Pan,2012).

*Infrastructure and Other services:*Tripura is fortunate to have natural beauty and cultural heritage as a major asset for tourism. The sites selected for tourism facilities are also picturesque and deserves merit. However, the State has to deal with infrastructure hurdles including connectivity problems (DoT,2003). Tripura has a road length of 15539 kilometres covering both metalled and non-metalled surfaces. The major towns in the state are connected by National Highway 44 which covered around 400 kilometres inside the State. National Highway links Tripura with rest of the North Eastern States' (NESs) of India like Assam and Mizoram. Tripura Road Transport Corporation (TRTC) provides road transport services in the State operate 81 buses on 32 routes. There are private transport operators as well operating buses and taxis both inside

and other parts of NESs. Tripura has three domestic airports, out of which Singerbil Airport in Agartala is operational. The airport is situated twelve kilometressouth-east of Agartala city. It is the second biggest and busiest airport in the North East India plying nearly hundred domestic flights per week. Domestic airlines operating from the airport are Jet Airways, Indian and Air India, Kingfisher, Paramount Airways and Indigo Airlines with regular flights to destinations like Kolkata (West Bengal), Guwahati and Silchar (Assam), Imphal (Manipur), Delhi, Chennai (Tamil Nadu),etc.

Road transport has always been a cause of concern for the landlocked state. Porous road network via Karimganj district of South Assam badly affected the state's economical progress. As Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh) is just a four hours road journey from state capital Agartala, it is the only viable option left for the state to tie up joint transportation network and also connectivity to one of the major cities of this sub-region. On July 11, 2001, bus service was launched to connect Dhaka with Agartala to facilitate the flow of commuters between these two destinations. Foreign nationals visiting Dhaka have the option of travelling to Tripura via Akhaura border post with an appropriate visa. Subsequently, on 7th June 2015 first direct bus between Kolkata and Agartala through *chicken neck* via Bangladesh, was flagged off by politicians from both the sides. This step reduces the distance between two terminal points from 1650 km to 515 km pave the way for increased influx of tourists (both domestic and foreign) from a metro station to Agartala. Recently, meter gauge railway track in the state was replaced with broad gauge track which can reduce the time required to visit the state, when fully operational. Efforts are on to extend this railway network to Bangladesh's Southeastern city of Akhaura, a fifteen km long track, linking it with Chittagong port, Sylhet, and Dhaka through Indian initiative. An agreement to this effect was signed between former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and his counterpart from Bangladesh, Sheik Hasina in January 2010.

Tripura has a cultural heritage of music, fine arts, handicrafts, and dance. Music is an integral part of tribal people of Tripura. The Tripura Tourism Development Corporation (TTDC) Ltd organizes

tourism festivals in the State to attract tourists. These include orange and tourism festivals, Pilak festival, Neermahal festivals, Jampui Tourism festivals, North East tourism festivals, etc. Tripura handloom represents a unique blend of three traditions --- Tribal, Bengali, and Manipuri weaving. TTDC is giving emphasis on Matabari tourism circuit, Northwest circuit, product infrastructure and circuit development in the west-south district, UNDP endogenous project at Kamalasagar, destination development at Agartala, Belonia, Udaipur, setting up of Institute of Hotel Management (IHM),etc. for the growth of tourism in the State.

Key parameters for Circuit Development: The key parameters for circuit development are adopted from interim report of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (2012b) applicable for Indian State of West Bengal. These include tourist profile, carrying capacity, travel and tour and lastly safety and security.

The expenditure pattern of the tourist (both domestic and foreign) indicating towards budgeted segment of the tourists' (Meena and Das Pan: 2012). It implies that the State failed to attract 'high end' visitors for tourism development in Tripura. The tourism carrying capacity has never been an issue in Tripura as the occupancy rate in hotels is quite lowexcept a few months during a year. Further, low growth of tourism in the state has never threatened the sustainability of the small hilly state. Moreover, tourism intensity (tourist arrivals as a percentage of the total population at a given point of time) of Tripura is low compared to the other North Eastern States' (NESs).

Tripura has few TTDC recognized tour operators catering to the needs of tourists visiting the State. Apart from them, there are also organised tours by tour operators from West Bengal and other NESs. Similarly, the state is now devoid of any insurgency problem which existed earlier during the eighties and nineties.

VII. Discussion: Data reveal that air transport is the most preferred mode for FTAs followed by land and sea transport. The figure is as high as 98.5 percent in five consecutive years from 1996-2000 and went down to 83.1 percent in 2003 and finally, it raised to 89.1 percent in 2008. Foreign tourists visiting India have shown a lack of interest in sea transport as a mode of transportation which never

registered even one percent of tourist traffic during the last thirteen years.

The following table reveals the archaeological heritage (47.6 percent) prime motive for foreign tourists visiting India during the survey period. This follows culture (12.9 percent), adventure (8.8 percent), leisure (8.2 percent), friends (7.1 percent) business (5.3 percent), religion (4.1 percent), vivid tourism spots (3.5 percent),etc. in descending order. The heritage, culture and adventure alone account for motivating 69.3 foreign tourists travelling to India during the survey.

Table:3 Prime Motivation Behind Foreign Tourists' visiting India (Percent)

Motivating Force	Category of Tourists'				
	Individual	Group	Students	Family	Total
Land of Ancestors	1.3	--	--	4.2	1.2
Heritage	39.7	60.8	5.9	75.0	47.6
Vivid Tourist Spots	--	3.9	11.8	8.3	3.5
Culture	20.5	7.8	5.9	4.2	12.9
Leisure	6.4	13.7	11.8	---	8.2
Friends	6.4	5.9	17.6	4.2	7.1
Adventure	11.5	2.0	29.4	---	8.8
Business	7.7	--	11.8	4.2	5.3
Religion	5.1	3.9	5.9	---	4.1
Wildlife	1.3	2.0	---	---	1.2

Source: AC Nielsen ORG MARG Primary Survey

With respect tothe North Eastern States, during 2010, India and Bangladesh agreed to provide for transit route through Bangladesh to North Eastern Region (NER) with rest of India especially for movement of goods (Murshid:2011). Initially, Bangladesh was hesitant to allow India to provide trans-shipment facility for the NER but India reciprocated in the right direction by providing similar transport facility to Bangladesh to reach Himalayan landlocked countries like Bhutan and Nepal, thereby actively participate in moving towards an integrated transport network for this region as a whole. The opening of Myanmar route further gives India some relief regarding reduced transportation cost due to both inter and intra-regional disadvantages for the partially land-locked state like Tripura (Sen et al.,2011).

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion, a statistical representation was given to assess the status of circuit tourism development in Tripura in general and WSTC in particular. WSTC is land locked from three sides in the remote corner of North East India. Although Tripura is blessed with rail, road, and air facility, the distance covered by rail and road to reach Tripura made it a difficult destination to travel for the tourists visiting the state. Moreover, the state does not have any specific policy to draw foreign tourists visiting other parts of India.

Despite these issues, the possession tourism products like heritage, ecotourism and pilgrimage tourism products present an opportunity for the state to draw this segment of foreign tourist from already saturated tourism circuits in India. For example, on an average 91 per cent of foreign tourists travel to India by air transport, of which 3.37 percent disembark at Kolkata International Airport. This high percentage of airtravellers could be tapped to realise the full potential of Tripura's tourism. The Tripura Tourist Information Centre at Kolkata can take an active part in informing such tourists' about the availability of tourism products in the state. Also, suitable packages can be offered to them to visit the state. In recent times, buses ply weekly twice between Agartala and Dhaka and thrice between Kolkata and Agartala via Bangladesh. The people from the state have a close affinity with people from Kolkata, West Bengal as the same language is spoken in both the destination. A collaborative effort involving tourism officials from West Bengal, Bangladesh and Tripura could lay down a mutually beneficial platform for all the stakeholders. Further, sub-regional initiatives like BIMSTEC, BCIM's recognition of tourism as one of the priority area can do wonders for peripheral destinations like Tripura as route direction enters through Tripura via Bangladesh on its way to Mizoram and Manipur to South East Asian countries.

North East Region Vision 2020 (DoNER:2008) has professed for the opening of another international airport at Agartala to cover Southern part of North Eastern Region. However, our experience of opening of Guwahati International Airport, on the supply side of tourism development, does not augur well regarding bringing

more foreign tourists' in the region. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India in general and Department of Tourism, Government of Tripura, in particular, must realise the basic necessity of promoting tourism in the industrially starved state like Tripura. However, to achieve that feat, meaningful strategies have to be formulated by both central and state governments and implemented within a reasonable time frame.

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