

**THE IMPACT OF FAIR TOURISM ON LOCAL ECONOMY – A CASE
STUDY OF PATHARCHAPURI FAIR**

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Abstract

Event tourism has now been recognized as one important form of tourism. It is especially effective in creating a time bound drive in increasing the number of tourists and visitors. Fairs and festivals are a part of such event tourism. In India, religious fairs attract thousands of people and play an important role in the economy. The Patharchapuri fair is such a religious fair, held to honor a Muslim Saint, popularly known as Daata Baba. This huge fair provides livelihood to hundreds of people who come here during the fair to ply their trade. This paper seeks to create a profile of these people and highlight the economic importance of the fair. It also attempts to suggest ways to better exploit this economic opportunity.

Introduction

Man has travelled to places far and near for various reasons since ancient days. This travel has been for the purpose of exploring and conquering new lands, gaining knowledge and for trade. The unquenchable thirst for the new has created wanderlust in human beings. Gradually, with the modern inventions in the field of transport, more and more people have begun to travel. The concept of tourism has emerged. Professors Hanzikar and Krapf has defined tourism as “.. the totality of the relationship and phenomena arising from the travel and stay of strangers provided the stay does not imply the establishment of a permanent residence and is not connected with a remunerated activity.” (Jayapalan, 2001).

One of the most common motivations for tourism is pilgrimage. People often traveled far and endured many difficulties to visit shrines of saints and other places of worship. As a religious tourist spot grew in importance, many traders, entertainers and other people were attracted to make their livelihood. Hence, the pilgrim centers often played a vital role in the economy of the region.

Fairs and festivals are celebrated to commemorate some auspicious occasions. Huge numbers of people congregate to pay their respects. Vendors of every description make brisk business at this time. Hence, festivals are an important factor in local economy of the spot.

The Patharchapuri fair is held in the district of Birbhum in west Bengal, India in honor of a Muslim Saint called Daata Baba. This month long festival provides a lucrative opportunity to



local traders. Thousands of visitors come to the fair to pay their respects to the saint. This injects some much needed cash into the economy. This paper seeks to study the fair from the viewpoint of the traders and its impact on the economy. It also puts forward some suggestions to increase the business opportunities at the fair.

Background of the study

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the Indian economy. According to the purpose of travel, it can be of various types. The motivation can range from natural attractions, cultural features, religious beliefs to business opportunities, adventure sports and fairs and festivals (Sethi, 1999). Event tourism is one such subtype of tourism. This term was first used in 1987 by the New Zealand Tourist and Publicity Department. An event has been described as a preplanned activity organized at a specific time and venue and targeted towards a specific audience. (Eckerstein, 2002). Getz identified a number of categories of event tourism (Getz, 2005). Of these, religious fairs and festivals are an important subtype. The government of India recognizes the importance of fairs in attracting tourists. So, it promotes various fairs and provides a variety of assistance. Fairs are also the opportunity for numerous local and small traders to earn an income. The Patharchapuri Fair has been studied in this background.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study of this paper are as follows:

- i. To give an idea of the historical and cultural background of the Patharchapuri fair.
- ii. To study the profile of the shopkeepers plying their trade at the fair
- iii. To outline the economic importance of the Patharchapuri fair
- iv. To put forward suggestions to properly exploit the economic opportunities at the fair

Database and methodology

Information about the Patharchapuri fair was gathered from local publications. The fair is conducted by the “Daata Baba Uras Utsav and Organizing Committee”. Interviews were conducted with several committee members. Finally, questionnaire survey of 30 different shopkeepers was carried out to obtain their views.

The primary and secondary information gathered in the above ways are then tabulated and analyzed using various statistical methods.

Study area

Patharchapuri ((23° 55' 36.52" N, 87° 26' 3.45" E) is a small village in West Bengal, India. It is situated in the district of Birbhum and lies about 10 kilometers away from Suri – the district headquarter. It is easily accessible by the Suri – Bakreswar road. Bakreswar is a well known

tourist spot famous for its hot springs. Patharchapuri village derives its name probably from the large chunks (chapurs) of granitic rocks (pathar) lying in the area. A Muslim saint popularly called Daata Baba had lived here for some time. He is buried here and a Mazaar has been constructed in this honor. A huge annual fair is held here to commemorate the saint. This paper studies the economic significance of this fair.

The Patharchapuri fair

The Patharchapuri fair is held in the month of March every year to commemorate the death anniversary of Daata Baba. He was a Muslim Saint born in a remote village in Peshawar. His name was Mehboob Shah Oli. He was orphaned at an early age. Soon he left home and wandered from place to place. He studied both Hinduism and Islam and had spent a lot of time in Ajmer Sharif. While the exact year of his birth is not known, it is known that he came to Bengal in 1841. At this time he stayed in this village of Patharchapuri. However, he left after two years and travelled throughout Bengal. He returned to this village again in 1862 and stayed here till his death in 1892. Tales of his miraculous powers spread through the region and he became hugely popular. Daata Baba, as he was known because of his tendency to donate freely, had died on the 10th of the Bengali month of *Chaitra* and was buried on the 11th. (Khan, 2014) Every year, a huge fair is held at Patharchapuri to commemorate these two days. The fair officially lasts for seven days around 29th March. However, it continues unofficially for almost a month.

Today, the Mazaar is administered by a trustee board. In addition to the mazaar, there is a mosque, a guest house, a free soup kitchen (*langaar khana*) and three ponds under the ownership of the board. People from far and near come to the fair to donate cloth (*Chaddar*) at the Mazaar. They often stay for a few days. The fair was held on a small scale for the first time in 1918. As it grew popular, the “Daata Baba Uras utsav and development committee” was set up in 1992. Though the fair is officially held for 5 days, it continues for almost a month. The number of visitors to the fair has been increasing every year. Hence, this is a golden time for local traders as well.

The shopkeepers at the fair

As in any other fair, a number of stalls are set up at the Patharchapuri fair and most of them enjoy a brisk business. A survey was done of 30 different stalls to understand the profile of the shopkeepers.

One of the first things which were noticed is that most of the shopkeepers have been doing business here for a long time. Only 3% have come to the fair with their wares for the first time, but the rest of them have erected their stalls for many years. Hence, the fair has become



a place of earning a good amount every year and these shopkeepers have begun to rely heavily on their extra income from this fair at this time of the year.

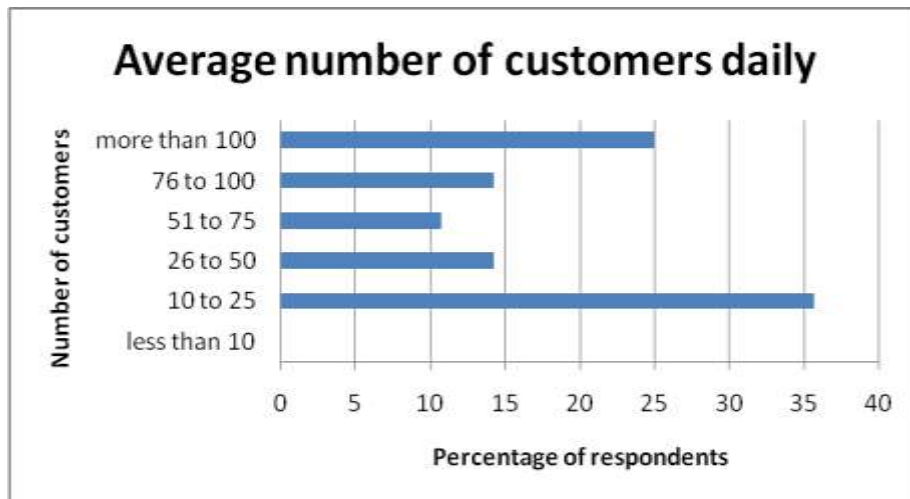
The fair is officially held for five days. However, the stalls begin to appear a few days before the designated date and continue for almost one to one and a half weeks after the fair is officially over. The month being March and the area being predominantly agricultural, there is not much scope of alternative employment at this time. Hence the fair offers a good financial opportunity.

The shopkeepers come from the nearby villages as well as from far away. The survey showed that only 21% of the shopkeepers are the residents of the village Patharchapuri. Almost 36% come from surrounding villages while 43% hail from far off villages. This indicates that the economic impact of the fair is spread over a considerable area. 64% of the shopkeepers are residents of the district of Birbhum while few come from the neighboring districts of Murshidabad and Burdwan. 3.5% of the shopkeepers come from the neighboring state of Jharkhand.

In order to understand the economic profile of the shopkeepers, they were asked about their occupation during the rest of the year. 7.4% work at something else during the rest of the year. Most of them work as share croppers or daily wage earners. The remaining shopkeepers either have permanent shops of these wares or are travelling salesmen who travel from fair to fair selling these items.

The shopkeepers were asked about their business pattern. 35% shopkeepers replied that they get an average of 10 to 25 customers every day. 14% shopkeepers said that they get 26 to 50 customers daily while another 14% gets 76 to 100 customers every day. All of them confirmed that there are definite peak and lean time of business. The most amount of business was done on the two main days of the fair – 10th and 11th Chaitra. The number of visitors to the Mazaar is maximum on these two dates. 29% of the shopkeepers said that they get 21 to 30 customers during peak time though 37.5% shopkeepers said that they do not get more than 20 customers even during the peak time. On the other hand, the number of customers falls to 5 to 10 during the lean time. From this analysis, it is clear that the volume of business is on the small scale. However, it is a vital supplement to the income of the local people.

Fig. 1. Number of customers at different shops of the fair (daily)



Source: Primary survey (March, 2006)

In order to further understand the economic importance of the fair, the shopkeepers were asked about their average income during the fair. 39% reported a total income between Rs. 5000 to 10000 while as many as 18% reported a total income above Rs 20000. Only 3.5% shopkeepers reported an income less than Rs 2000. Considering the fact that the prices of the commodities start from Rs 2 to Rs 5 in most cases, it can be concluded that most of the shops do brisk business during the fair.

Fig. 2. The average income of shopkeepers at the fair



Source: Primary survey (March, 2016)

From the above discussion the fact emerges that most of the shopkeepers who come to set up shop at the Patharchapuri fair are small and petty traders with a few middle class traders. This fair act as lifeline to these shopkeepers and obviously plays a vital role in the economy of the area.

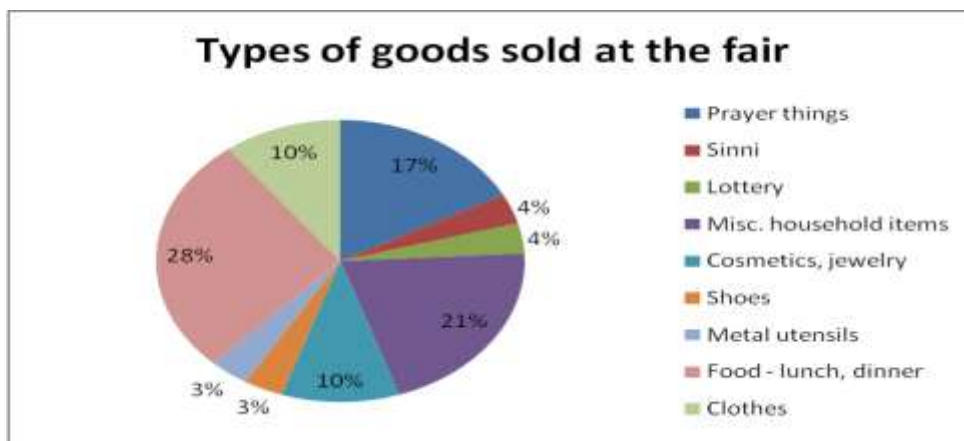


The role of Patharchapuri fair in the local economy

It is necessary to understand the character of the local economy in order to determine the role this fair may play in the economy of the region. The district of Birbhum is not a very prosperous one. The ground is made up of hard rocks, generally overlain by red and reddish yellow soil which is low in fertility. Though most people depend on agriculture, the poor quality of soil has prevented its development to any great extent. The climate also tends to be extreme. There is no major industry. However, being a plain area, the district is thickly populated. It therefore becomes imperative to find alternate sources of livelihood for the population.

The Patharchapuri fair offers a nice opportunity of income for the people of the area. It is held in March when no major agricultural activity is planned. Thousands of people come to visit the fair every year. These include both tourists and same day visitors. Almost all of them come with the dual purpose of worshipping at the Mazaar and enjoying the fair experience. Though Daata Baba was a Muslim saint, he is very popular locally and both Hindus and Muslims visit the fair at this time. Hence, this is a time of brisk business. The survey revealed that there are a number of permanent shops around the Mazaar as well and they enjoy a comfortable increase in business at this time. Food stalls ranging from tea shops and sweet shops to those offering full meals are most popular while shops selling typical prayer paraphernalia also do brisk business. Utensils of stone and wrought iron and miscellaneous household items are other popular goods on sale. Many shopkeepers have set up recorded messages on loudspeakers to sell their wares while others attract buyers by offering everything at a flat price of Rs. 5 or Rs. 10. A lively commerce is carried out and this undoubtedly injects some much needed cash in the economy.

Fig. 3. The common goods sold at the fair

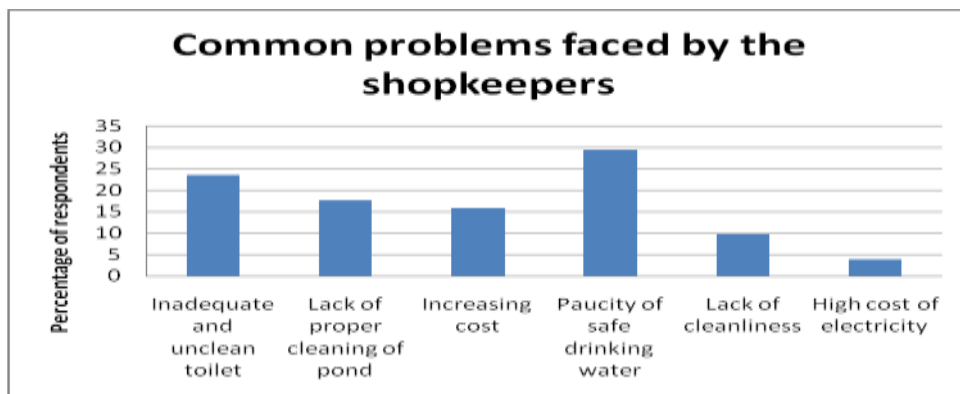


Source: Primary survey (March, 2016)

Suggestions to fully explore the economic potential of the Patharchapuri fair

Before any suggestions can be put forward to fully develop the economic potential of the Patharchapuri fair, it is necessary to focus the attention on the problems faced by the shopkeepers at the fair. These problems, as explained by the shopkeepers themselves are stated below.

Fig. 4. Some Common problems faced by the shopkeepers at the fair



Source: Primary survey (March, 2016)

In order to set up stalls, shopkeepers have to pay an amount to the Organizing Committee. They also have to pay for the construction of the temporary stalls and electricity. This cost has been increased recently. Though the increase is not very much, it has definitely created difficulties for the small traders. Moreover, the Committee has allocated particular place to particular shops. Traders who have been coming to the fair regularly for many years have been shifted. Many seem to think that this has affected their sales as old customers have not been able to find them. Shopkeepers also suggested that the gaming stands should be shifted away because people coming with families often avoid the areas around the gaming stalls. Taking into consideration the views of the shopkeepers, the Organizing committee and the local economy, the following suggestions has been put forward to maximize the economic benefit of the Patharchapuri fair:

- i. The ministry of Tourism, Government of India recognizes the importance of fairs and festivals and has issued a set of guidelines to develop the fair. The fair committee can approach the relevant bodies for the release of funds as outlined in this guideline. Apart from that, the State government sponsors a number of fairs. The fair committee should explore all avenues to obtain more funding. This will allow it to provide better infrastructure at lower cost to the shopkeepers which will definitely provide a boost to the local economy.



- ii. A number of shops are established permanently in the area around the Mazaar. Most of them sell items of worship. It is vital to arrange the same types of shops at the same area. This will promote healthy competition. The established shops will attract customers and this will benefit the smaller shops as well. On the other hand, the activities which repel each other should be placed far apart. For example, gaming is a socially integral part of a visit to the Mazaar. However, families generally avoid the betting shops. So, these should be placed far away.
- iii. Many sellers come from far away and stay the duration of the fair. Hence it is vital to provide the basic infrastructural facilities to them. The fair committee provides stalls and electricity on payment. Around 200 to 250 temporary toilets are erected in the area to cater to everyone who comes to the fair. However, little attention is paid to their maintenance. Visitors who come to the fair for two to three days manage to adjust with the unsanitary conditions, but the sellers have to stay for a month and unclean toilets pose serious health hazards for them. Similarly, safe drinking water is also scarce. Drinking water pouches are distributed by the municipality free of cost but these are generally aimed for the visitors. Many tube wells are not operational, thereby adding to the water shortage. The pond beside the Mazaar becomes the main source of water for all activities and this increases the health hazards.
- iv. Fire safety is another important consideration for the shopkeepers. My survey showed that these measures are very nominal in the fair. Moreover, stalls selling food items and using stoves for the purpose of cooking are distributed throughout the fare ground. Hence, the danger of fire hazard is quite high. Thousands of people visit the fair at the peak time. It is necessary to make the vendors aware of fire safety measures. The shopkeepers are many in number and they are present at the fairground for the longest period. The committee can organize a fire safety meeting and actually mobilize the support of these traders in case of fire. It is difficult to keep a team of firefighters ready. Instead, the shopkeepers can be trained in fire safety regulations.
- v. Many traders complained about the increasing cost of doing business at the fair. The fair committee has increased the rent for stall and charge of electricity. Moreover, the Hindu festival of Holi has also fallen at this time in this year. Though Daata Baba is a Muslim Saint, his popularity attracts many Hindus to the shrine as well. Also, the Hindu population from the surrounding area comes to visit the fair as a form of entertainment. So, the timing of the festival has cut into the business for the fair. In such situations, the committee can offer some special concessions to help the traders.

- vi. Business will flourish only when sufficient number of visitors comes to the fair. In order to encourage the visitors, proper infrastructural facilities are necessary. These include increased and more organized transport, better toilets and safe drinking water, designated parking area for vehicles, greater number of accommodations, better level of cleanliness and provision of security. Some promotional campaigns may also be undertaken. This will increase the number of visitors to the fair and the economy of the area will benefit as a whole.
- vii. Patharchapuri can play a far more significant role in the economy of the district of Birbhum. It lies on the road to Bakreswar from Suri. Suri is the district headquarter with good connectivity by train and bus while Bakreswar is a well known tourist spot – famous for its hot springs. A tourist circuit can be designed to include both these spots and round trips can be organized from Suri. A feasibility study is recommended in this regard.

Conclusion

The Patharchapuri fair is one of the largest of its kind and it plays a significant role in the economy and culture of the local people. It involves the congregation of thousands of devotees and presents unique economic opportunities. Proper planning is essential to exploit these opportunities and at the same time ensure the safety and environmental benefits to the area.

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