



NICHE TOURISM IN WEST BENGAL: APPLYING THE LONG TAIL MARKET APPROACH

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Abstract

The state of West Bengal in eastern India is in search of alternate economic development avenues. Tourism can serve this purpose. The state is rich not only in major tourist attractions, but also a myriad of small tourist products with definite but limited appeal. It is possible to develop these small tourist products into niche tourist markets. The internet plays a very important role in marketing these products. It helps to reach out to tourists who are separated by space and who are looking for very definite experiences. This is the long tail marketing approach to tourism. According to this approach, most of the revenue in the industry is generated by mass tourists. But there are a few tourists who are actually looking for something unique and different from the mass market. The internet has made it possible for these tourists to come to know about the small niche destinations. The operators of such niche tourism face no competition from the major players in the market. They can build up a respectable market at minimal cost. Niche tourists are not looking for any artificial excitement, but they are looking for real cultural experiences. The community must be open minded and friendly in order to help in the growth of the niche tourism industry.

Keywords: *long tail market approach, niche tourism, community based tourism, internet*



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Introduction

The tourism industry is earmarked to be one of the most important engines of growth in the present century. The worldwide market share of this industry is growing by leaps and bounds. In 2019, travel and tourism industry contributed 10.4% of the total GDP of the world (www.wttc.org) Though Europe remains the most attractive tourist destination, several other



areas are now attracting more and more people. Various analyses by the different Marketing firms show that the tourist movement is highest amongst the developed countries. In fact, the idea of a gap year, where students take a break from studies and travel to different places have become almost universal in such countries (Acorn, 2008; p.14).

Developing countries like India command only a small part of this globally growing market. However, the importance of the tourism sector has now been recognized in the country. Budget allocation for the development of this sector has been increasing in every plan period. This can be seen in Table 1. Still, its full potential remains unexplored.

Table 1: Government Allocation for Tourism Development in India under Five Year Plans

Five Year Plan	Time Period	Plan Allocation (in Rs.)
1 st	1951-1956	0.00
2 nd	1956-1961	336.38 Lakhs
3 rd	1961-1966	800 Lakhs
Annual plan	1966-1967*	58.50 Lakhs
Annual plan	1967-1968*	87.65 Lakhs
Annual plan	1968-1969*	183.81 Lakhs
4 th	1969-1974	36 Crores
5 th	1974-1979	133 Crores
6 th	1980-1985	187.46 Crores
7 th	1985-1990	326.16 Crores
Annual plan	1990-1991	83 Crores
Annual plan	1991-1992	90 Crores
8 th	1992-1997	773.62 Crores
9 th	1997-2002	793.75 Crores
10 th	2002-2007**	2900 Crores
11 th	2007-2012***	3112.71 Crores
	Revised****	5156 Crores

Source: Five Year Plans, Government of India; *Indian Tourism: Economic Planning & Statistics; **Annual Report, 2002-2003, Department of Tourism, Government of India; ***Annual Report, 2011-2012, Department of Tourism, Government of India; ****Report of



the Working Group on Tourism, 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017), Ministry of Tourism, Government of India.

West Bengal is a state located in eastern India. It has a huge potential for the development of tourism industry. This is because it is rich in tourist attractions. These are diverse enough to attract a vast variety of tourists. However, being one of the most densely populated states of the country, there is a very real problem of the threat of overdevelopment of the industry. This can create stress on the already overburdened civic and infrastructural facilities of the state leading to the creation of animosity towards the tourists rather than a solution to the economic problems. Hence, careful planning is needed to promote the tourism industry in the state.

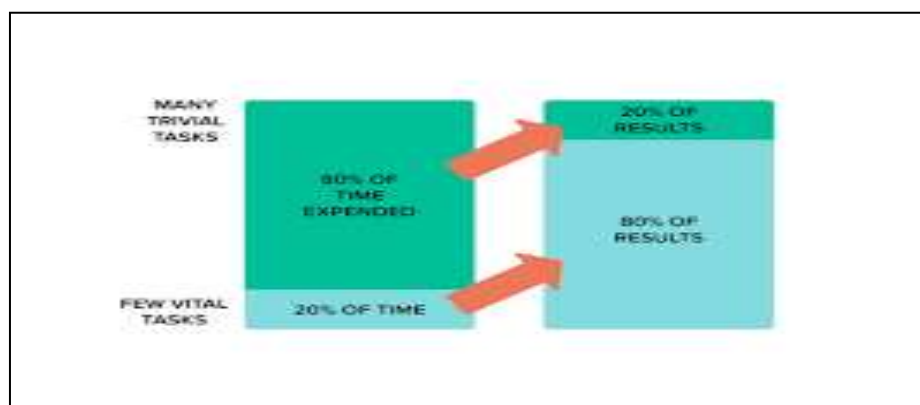
This paper explores the concept of long tail in tourism development and aims to analyze whether and how this concept can be applied towards developing niche tourism in West Bengal so that the state can reap the benefits of the industry without any unwelcome consequences.

Long tail market approach to tourism

The traditional marketing approach relies on the Pareto Principle. This was first proposed by Pareto in 1964 while studying the distribution of wealth (Pareto, 1964). This principle is also known as the 80/20 rule and was applied widely in many other fields of economics (Brynjolfsson et al, 2011, pp 1373–1386).

The Pareto principle can be easily understood with the help of the bell curve or the normal distribution curve in statistics. In such a curve, most of the values are concentrated around the midpoint which is the highest point of the curve. Furthest from this point, the distribution tapers off to a tail where only a few of the values are found.

Fig. 1. The Pareto Principle or the 80/20 rule



Source: Koch, R. (2001), *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret of Achieving More with Less*, London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing

Pareto used this principle to describe his long tail. He pointed out that most of the demand within a specific market is for only a few select commodities. This constitutes the head. Then there are gradually reducing demand for other commodities in the same industry which forms the tail. According to Pareto, 80% of the profit of the industry is derived from only 20% of the commodities sold. The example of the music industry serves to demonstrate this point. In a particular season in the music industry, 80% of the demand is for new releases and recent hits. The greatest share of the revenue is derived from these few musical numbers. However, at the same time, there is a small demand for golden oldies, obscure melodies and similar other specialized products. These form only 20% of the total demand of the industry and they constitute the tail. The profit of the industry is not directed by this segment. Rather it is the broad head which is the main source of profit for the industry (Lew, 2008, pp 409-411).

Fig. 2. The long tail supply chain (adapted from *The Long Tail* by Chris Andersen, 2006)



The Pareto principle has been criticized on many fronts, but its basic premise holds true. 80% of the profit of an industry is definitely derived from only 20% of the products – those which are most recent, most popular or otherwise remarkable. For a normal shop with limited space and other overheads, it makes simple business sense to stock only the most profitable products of the industry so that they move rapidly off the rack and generate healthy sales.



This also holds true for the tourism industry. In any given destination, there are only a few or even only one attraction which draws the greatest number of tourists to the spot. Many of these tourists do not even bother to visit other local attractions which may be located nearby. The authorities also concentrate their budget and efforts in developing the tourism infrastructure around this main attraction. Other smaller areas of interest are ignored. This is especially true for developing countries where the budget is limited and the authorities are forced to choose one or two spots to focus their efforts.

In 2004, Anderson put forward the term Long tail and demonstrated the growing importance of this segment in the age of the internet. The 80% of the product, which Pareto says are not in bulk demand, constitutes this long tail. Of the total market, only 20% demand is for this segment of the products. In a normal brick and mortar store with limited space, it is simply not logistically possible to store these products in the hopes of an occasional customer. However, the internet has changed the situation. E commerce has now created a market where the total revenue generated from the long tail can substantially increase the profitability of a company (Anderson, 2004, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html>).

We can use the example of the music industry again. For a brick and mortar store, it is uneconomic to store outdated numbers and playlists. It is also not worthwhile to advertise for customers who fall in the long tail. But, for an internet based company which delivers its products in downloadable format, storing obscure melodies has negligible cost. It can deliver it easily, advertise for it without any additional cost and can obtain customers from many different parts of the world. An important point to remember is that not only are the customers in the long tail few in number, they are widely dispersed and may even reside in a different country. So, they cannot come to the physical store to pick up their selections, but they can easily download them. E commerce has thus created a much needed bridge between the suppliers and the long tail consumers.

It is now necessary to understand how this long tail market approach can be applied to tourism. Most of the tourists are mass tourists and there is a definite demand for bulk products or experiences in the tourism industry. This is the head of the curve which relies on the Pareto principle. For every destination, there is a definite demand for some particular sights or experiences which mark the speciality of that destination. It is easy and profitable for the tourism firms to market that major product and they often get enough number of tourists to



satisfy their profit margin. This situation has been described as the ‘economy of superstars’ by Rosen in 1981 (Rosen, 1981, pp 845-858). This implies that the supply market of tourism is dominated by a few large companies who cater to the largest segment of the tourist. This point has been further illustrated by the Maxmin concept of Miranda in 2012. Briefly, this concept implies that a minimum number of suppliers and products are used to satisfy the maximum number of tourists and the benefits of the industry are also concentrated in the hands of the minimum number of players (Miranda, 2012, retrieved from Longhi et al, 2015, p5).

However, apart from this mass market, there is a small but definite emerging market for the less famous attractions offered by the destination. This phenomenon has gradually been recognized in the tourism industry in the guise of niche tourism. This first appeared as niche marketing, but the concept gradually changed to niche tourism. The long tail tourists mostly make up the niche tourism. Previously, it was impossible and often unprofitable to cater to a few tourists who were looking for something different within the mass market. Hence the long tail was ignored. However, the internet has helped to put several like-minded travellers in touch with each other. The tourism operators are also finding it easy to get access to these tourists who are not satisfied by the mass market and are looking for something different. While the giant tour operators are best suited to cater to the mass tourists, small operators can survive and flourish in this age of long tail tourist market.

At this point, it is necessary to understand the concept of niche tourism and how it fits into the long tail supply of the tourism industry.

Niche tourism

The idea of niche tourism has been derived from the concept of niche marketing. Hutchinson had put forward the idea of niche as early as 1957. He described it as the location which is occupied by an organism where it flourishes best against its competitors. This idea was appropriated by Keegan in 1992 in the arena of business economics. He and his fellow researchers defined a niche market as a small and highly specialized section of the market where there is no competition. The idea of niche marketing was later defined more precisely but it was not till the new millennium that it was applied to tourism. The Crichton Tourism research Centre at the University of Glasgow held a conference titled ‘Niche Tourism in Question: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Problems and Possibilities’ in 2002. This was the first organized attempt to formulate a concept of niche tourism from diverse business literature.



Several research works followed the launch of this new idea, but it was Novelli, who clearly defined niche tourism and described its distinguishing characteristics. She also introduced the ideas of macro niches and micro niches and showed how there exists a scope for more and more specialized markets in the tourism industry.

Long tail market approach applied to niche tourism

The idea of the long tail market approach and the development of niche tourism go hand in hand. The long tail is essentially an aggregate of tourists with highly specialized demands but their numbers are small. These are essentially the niche tourists. They have several common characteristics. They come from diverse parts of the world. However, it is observed that more specialized the niche tourists, higher is their level of education and exposure to diverse culture. They are also more open to adventure and new experiences. Often they are more socially and environmentally responsible and are interested in obtaining in depth experience and understanding of the area they visit.

Only the long tail marketing approach can successfully cater to the niche tourists. The internet has a very significant role to play in this regard. The destination will have to offer highly specialized tourism services. These will necessarily be of high value and is unlikely to appeal to the mass tourist. Such niche marketing companies will have to find their customers from all over the world with the help of the internet. The bulk tourist market may be left to the 'superstars' while the small operators can concentrate on the niche market.

Niche tourism in West Bengal

Keeping the above theoretical discussion in mind, it is necessary to analyze whether it is possible to apply the long tail approach in promoting tourism in West Bengal. This approach is obviously suited to the niche tourist market. So, it is necessary to identify the major niche tourism which can be developed in the state of West Bengal.

The geographical diversity of the state has helped in the development of two bulk tourist centres in the state. One of them revolves round the capital of Kolkata. The city is rich in history and culture and is located close to the Sunderbans – one of the most fascinating mangrove forests of the world with huge biological diversity. The other bulk tourist centre lies in North Bengal, centred on the town of Darjeeling, famous for its magnificent views of the Himalayas in general and the Kanchenjunga peak in particular. Though the tourism department



of the state government is trying to promote other tourist spots, these two areas undoubtedly cater to most of the tourists – both domestic and international – visiting the state.

The state of West Bengal offers a number of other less known attractions, but these are often ignored by the mass tourists. Examples include river tourism along the Bhagirathi Hooghly, event tourism encompassing the many fairs and festivals held throughout the year in many parts of the state, historical tourism in the Nawabi belt of Murshidabad and Maldah etc. There are still less known travel circuits like cycling and bird watching throughout Duars, textile tourism in south Bengal, rock climbing and trekking in Puruliya and eco tourism throughout the southern and northern parts of the state. Some of these activities have now merged with bulk tourist attractions. For example, White water rafting in the Teesta River has now become a part of the bulk tourist activity for those who visit Darjeeling. Certain events like Durga Puja in October and the holy dip in Gangasagar in January have assumed mega status. Instead of concentrating on these mass events, it is better to target the mass of events which occur in different parts of the state throughout the year. These have remained underdeveloped, but do have the potential to develop as niche tourist products. Directing attention to a mass *of* events rather than on one or two mass events can help develop niche tourism without putting excess pressure on the available resources and infrastructure (Calabrese et al, 2015, www.iipcccl.org). The long tail approach to tourism marketing can successfully be used to tap this tourist potential. At this time, the inbound tourist market is mostly dominated by a few big companies. Their marketing strategies are directed towards foreign tourists who are visiting India for primarily other destinations like the Golden triangle of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. The shrine of Mother Teresa in Kolkata serves to attract a large proportion of these tourists to Eastern India. Often, these tourists just visit Kolkata and Darjeeling and end their tour of West Bengal. It is neither possible nor desirable for the small tourist operators to try and carve out a part of this market for themselves. The ‘superstars’ have too well established infrastructure and enjoy huge economies of scale to allow any small operative to survive. However, the small tourist operator can take advantage of the long tail to survive – and even flourish – in this situation. In such case, a very strong supply chain will have to be set up. The internet has a crucial role to play.

It is necessary to understand that the niche tourists with their highly specialized demands come in small numbers from different parts of the world. Targeted marketing can help to capture the



interest of these tourists. It must be remembered that a niche tourism operator cannot survive with competition. In fact, the very definition of niche tourism is that it is a highly specialized arena where the operator is free from competition. So, first the target tourist group will have to be identified. Since niche tourists are often educated and have very specific needs, the designing of the website and its visibility becomes key factors in promoting this tourism. Appropriate search engine optimisation techniques will have to be employed so that the website can be easily identified with the help of a few keywords. Since this is a long tail marketing approach, there is almost no need for traditional advertising. All efforts and budget should be concentrated on developing and maintaining the website.

In recent years, web platforms which act as a venue for exchange of information among real users have emerged as the most popular and most trusted search areas. Websites where real tourists share their reviews and experiences serve as the modern word of mouth and care should be taken that the destination and the tour operator rates good reviews in such platforms. It is also helpful to keep track of such reviews and respond personally – especially to negative reviews (Longhi et al, 2015, p11). Increasing the visibility on the web in this manner can go a long way towards attracting more and more tourists from the long tail.

In order to acquire positive reviews and recommendations, it is necessary to deliver what is promised in the website. Tourists are often ready to put up with inconveniences and lack of modern facilities. In fact, the niche tourists are those who are looking for adventure and new experiences. But they are not to be hoodwinked by empty promises. It is best to build upon what is actually present rather than to promise something which is not possible to deliver. It must be remembered that long tail tourist supply depend on only a handful of tourists with very specialized needs and a few negative reviews can completely dry up the market.

The tourists in the long tail part of the supply chain are few in number. Hence any tourism operation based on this market has to be small in scale. Yet it has to be self-sustaining and should be able to generate at least a modicum of profit. Striking this balance is probably the hardest part of applying the long tail market approach to tourism development.

The role of the government

Tourism infrastructure like travel, security and communication depends on the efforts of the government. In our country, the government has to take active steps in order to help the small tourist operators to survive. No niche tourism can flourish if the place is too difficult to reach.

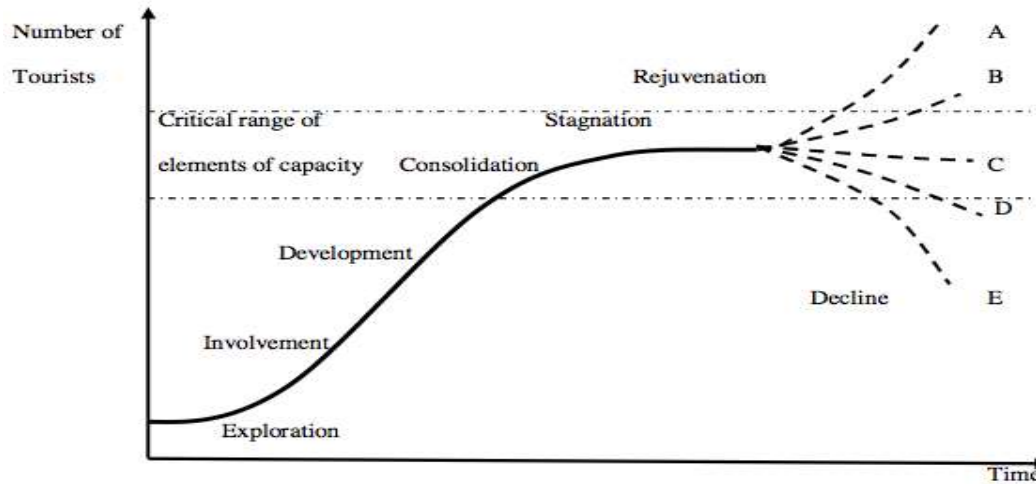


Since the budget is restricted, not every part of the state has well developed roads or other infrastructure like supply of water and electricity or proper drainage. These have to be provided by the government. Niche tour operators have to get together to form some sort of association which can bring the needs of the industry to the attention of the government. While private efforts in this direction may be lacking, the Tourism Department of the State Government can take proactive steps in bringing together such small operators. Joint action plans can be drawn up in cooperation with the local governing bodies so that the operators can deliver what they promise to the niche tourists. It must be remembered that the target is not merely to increase the number of tourists. Rather, the target is to get the high spending tourists, who will respect the local nature and culture and will be spread out over the year in such a manner as to be sustainable.

It is my suggestion that the intervention on the part of the government must be kept to a minimum in order to successfully apply the long tail marketing approach. Basic civic infrastructure like roads, water supply, sewerage and electricity should be provided and maintained by the government. High speed internet connectivity is a must. Other facets of tourism infrastructure should be left to the discretion of the tour operators. They may however be offered tax reliefs and other incentives in order to survive and thrive. At the same time, the government, in cooperation with the tour operators, need to put some planning guideline in place so that overdevelopment and its negative consequences can be avoided.

In this context, it is necessary to keep Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle Model of tourist destination or TALC in mind. According to this model, every tourist destination goes through definite stages. The first is the emerging trends when the area first begins to attract tourists. This is followed by growth and maturity, ultimately leading to decline. Butler suggests that the government should interfere at this stage, finding new ways to regenerate the spot. This will lead to revitalisation of the area through re branding and presenting the niche product in a new way.

Fig. 3 Tourist Area Life Cycle Model



Source: Butler, 1980, p7

However, a developing country like ours can learn from the experience of other countries and the government can play an important role from the stage of growth. Proper planning at this stage, in cooperation with the tour operator as well as the community can create a long sustained growth phase and can delay the decline phase. This requires a long term policy and commitment on the part of the government.

Conclusion

There is the very real scope of exploiting the long tail supply of tourism with the help of the internet and develop niche tourism in the state of West Bengal. An active role of the government is necessary to kick start such a project. PPP model is best suited for such development. At this time, the economy of West Bengal is in search for alternate areas of growth. The state has little scope in expanding in traditional industries. The huge population pressure has made agriculture unprofitable. Tourism may provide a small but steadily growing income to a variety of people. One of the greatest advantages of the tourism industry is that it provides employment to the weakest section of the society. If niche tourism is developed in the lines of community based tourism, it has a great potential for success. At the same time, the long tail supply approach can be utilized to increase the demand in an atmosphere that is almost completely free of competition. A few private tourist operators are already marketing niche products in the state. However, in order to ensure that the benefit reaches to a large number of people, an active role of the government is necessary. At the same time, it should not be intrusive and the local community should be given full independence in deciding how



far they will go in developing their locality as a niche market for tourists.

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