A Futuristic Perspective on West Bengal’s Tourism Industry:

Background:
The state of West Bengal is unique in terms of tourism, given the fact that it is the only state in India, which has all the three vital ingredients – sea (The Bay of Bengal), mountains (The Eastern Himalayas) and forest (The Sunderbans).

At the time of partition, Bengal was split into East Bengal and West Bengal. East Bengal is now Bangladesh while West Bengal became a state of the Indian republic with Kolkata as its capital. Geographically, the state is long and narrow, running from the delta of the Ganges in the south to the mighty Himalayas with Darjeeling as the “Queen of hill stations” nestled in the north.

During the British Raj, Bengal and more appropriately the city of Kolkata became the political hub of India. Much of Kolkata and Bengal’s most enduring developments took place between 1780 and 1820. Later in the 19th century, however, Bengal became a spark point in India’s Independence Struggle and this was the principal reason for the decision to transfer the capital to New Delhi in the year 1911. However, the loss of political power did not alter Kolkata’s economic control and the city continued to prosper until after the World War II. Kolkata is the largest city in India and by now may be ahead of London as the largest city in the British Commonwealth.

Kolkata and much of Bengal is regarded as the cultural cauldron of India. The whole world knows about the great ‘Bengal Renaissance” of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which started with Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1775-1833) and ended with Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

As far as tourism in West Bengal is concerned, it is still a backbencher as compared to the other Indian states that have marched way ahead of Bengal. In spite of having places of sheer magic like the hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, the lush green tea gardens of Dooars in North Bengal, the coastal town of Digha, the nature’s retreat
Santiniketan, historical places like Murshidabad, Plassey, Nabadweep etc… and the “City of Joy” – Kolkata itself, that lends an elegance to West Bengal which is irresistible and hard to match with that of any other tourist destinations of India.

In spite of the government’s honest and sincere intentions, mega industrial projects at various places of West Bengal has meet with stiff political resistance and the recent agitation in the hills, Darjeeling to be precise, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha has resorted to its non-co-operation movement with the government of West Bengal. Their demand is to carve out a separate hill state consisting of Darjeeling and certain areas neighboring to it. Clearly Darjeeling seems to be a case of “Paradise Lost” and the sooner a political solution, that as of now seems bleak and remote, the better it will be for the state’s fledgling tourism industry.

However, all is not lost and with the dynamic and visionary leadership of Miss Mamata Banerjee, the maverick Chief Minister of West Bengal, there has been a precipitous change for the better as far as the fortunes of West Bengal's tourism industry is concerned. Nothing exemplifies this change in Bengal more than the presence of international hotel chains like one of India's finest luxury hotels – the ITC Sonar Bangla, the Hyatt along with the avant-garde Vedic Village resort.

Tourism in Bengal has been given a shot-in-the-arm, courtesy a slew of futuristic tourism / hospitality projects that promises to cater to the exacting needs of the discerning world traveler.

In its drive to improve the state’s image as a preferred holiday destination, the government of West Bengal has its task cut out. The government has to realize that this sunrise industry that employs over 112 million people worldwide, making it by far the largest industry in the world has to be given its due importance in the government’s priority list, just the way the IT industry has been given the status of a “High Priority” industry.
Not only has the sector grown at a remarkable pace in the past, but most tourism experts expect that it will grow even more rapidly in the future, thereby resulting in career opportunities and rewards to thousands of the state’s unemployed youths. This is one industry, which is characterized by its dynamism, by the global scale on which it operates and by the vast range of employment opportunities it offers.

The government’s tourism policy should be planned in a manner that it becomes a unifying force, one that imparts direction and opportunity to the disgruntled youths. If properly implemented, Tourism can play the role of a non-invasive instrument of revitalization, conservation and growth. The watchword would be “Balanced Tourism Development” that will ensure the type and scale of tourism development which is compatible with the environment and social cultural milieu of the state.

In order to achieve the desired objectives, the structural organization of the tourism set-up has to be further strengthened and toned up. Processes and procedures has to be simplified along with the strengthening of the statistical machinery, reporting systems and development of a comprehensive data base to quantify and evaluate the socio-economic benefits derived from Tourism.

In view of the present global economic upheavals there has been a slow down in the flow of foreign tourists and even the business travelers have curtailed their visits to this part of the world. Dissecting the reasons for the slow down of the economy is not just an academic exercise, but might provide significant insights as to how to proceed with a sustainable policy for Tourism development.

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has on many occasions highlighted the immense economic viability of launching Eco-Tourism / Sustainable Tourism or more appropriately “Responsible Tourism” in his home state of West Bengal, which according to him, has the potential to ameliorate the sagging rural economy of not just West Bengal but other states of India as well.
The success story of Kerala is a case in point. They have not just implemented the visionary statement of Prof. Amartya Sen, but have even gone that extra mile towards creating niche rural tourism products like Spice Tourism, Agro Tourism, Ayurved Tourism, Monsoon Tourism etc…. which have been kind off lapped up by the discerning international travelers who keep coming to “God’s Own Country” due largely to the serene rural vistas along with highly cost effective rural tourism packages.

Needless to say, the state of West Bengal is land of stupendous dimensions and the Bengali prayer for peace – “Shanti Path” is one of the most ancient prayers for peace known to mankind and clearly reveals the inter-relationship of the environment and the synergy for peace.

Much of West Bengal’s industrial and economic problems can be solved if the mandarins of Writer’s Building listen to the clarion call of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen and others of their ilk who have been giving a lot of stress on developing Tourism through local community initiatives and NGOs who can act as useful vehicles for promoting environmentally sensitive tourism.

Let us consider a set of “Futuristic Tourism Development Avenues” which if implemented properly, promises to usher in a second Bengali renaissance, which is “Renaissance Through Tourism” in Tagore’s land.

A List of Futuristic Tourism Development Avenues for West Bengal’s Tourism Industry:

(1) Agro Tourism or Agriculture Tourism:

West Bengal is primarily an agriculture driven state and a vast majority of the population (70%) depend upon agriculture for earning their livelihood. West Bengal is amongst the few states in India, which is self-reliant when it comes to food production. The land pattern is fragmented in most parts.
The days of hotel, sightseeing and back to the hotel are gone. These days tourists demand real experiences during his /her holidays. The demand is for pleasant surroundings, usually at reasonable rates which West Bengal does have in abundance.

The essential ingredient of this new kind of tourism package is the organization of recreation which alone can enrich the tourism experience by allowing greater integration with the place visited and fuller involvement in the social and cultural life of the rural destination.

You may call it Agro Tourism or Village Tourism and under this Agro / Village Tourism project, a village in the radius of 30-40 Kms. of upcoming cities and bustling metros are taken under the project. With the mutual understanding of the village Panchayat and the resident villagers, the entire village is developed for the project.

A common place in the village is selected, particularly the land which is for common use. This place will provide a podium for artisans, snake charmers and other rural artists who solely depend on roadshows for their livelihood. Other places in the village like the cultivated pond, vegetable and fruit gardens etc. are impeccably preserved for the visiting tourists.

The tourists on their arrival to the village are allowed to fish in the pond at a very concessional rate. The gardens are open for the tourists so that they can “Pay, Eat and Pluck” the vegetables and fruits. When this system is fully evolved, the middle man who gets a major share of the income finds no place and the market is brought close to the village.

It has to be borne in mind that the Village Tourism which would be developed would not at all be a simulated one. The configuration of the village which has the set-up according to the caste and class would be explicitly exhibited. The city residents who have not seen the authentic village life would get a glimpse of the village life without paying the charges which the travel agents sell.
2. Fishing & Angling Tours:
West Bengal is a land crisscrossed by rivers and rivulets. The Bengali and his fish are inseparable. In every district of West Bengal, there are numerous rivulets, ponds and streams where a variety of fishes are reared. If statistical records are anything to go by, West Bengal has the highest numbers of country made boats.

Historically, the boatmen of Bengal are a unique lot. Their slow, uncluttered and philosophical outlook on life has been the subject of rich Bengali folklore. A lot of films too have been produced depicting the strange lifestyle of Bengal’s boatmen / Fishermen.

The government first needs to identify a bunch of fishing villages for accelerated tourism development. The pivotal idea is to construct rural fishermen’s huts made of straw and bamboo alongside the water bodies so as to provide shelter to the tourists. Their unique folk songs and traditions can be showcased in the central podium of the fishing village. For the die hard fishing and angling enthusiasts, leisurely boat rides on the water bodies may be encouraged and permission may be granted for fishing in the waters, which will come at price. Fishing equipments may be rented out to the tourists as well to heighten the tourisy experience.

3. Introducing Horse Cart Rides:
These days, horse driven carriages are indeed a novelty. Being the hub of British India, horse driven carriages were introduced in a phased manner by the British East India Company in Kolkata and many other parts of West Bengal.

If one delves into the history of horse driven carriages, they were in vogue even during the Mughal era and came in different shapes and sizes. In the 17th and 18th centuries, not only were these carriages the primary mode of transportation, they were also extensively used by the members of the erstwhile royal family. The carriages
then were fine pieces of craftsmanship. It is such a pity that today in the guise of modernity, we have to axe these wonderful eco-friendly vehicles.

Although introducing horse carriages may not be feasible in cities, it can be profitably launched in rural Bengal. The prospect of riding through intriguing by lanes and exotic Bengal countryside can be a heady feeling for the uninitiated.

Exclusive Horse Riding Retreats may be introduced in places with a colonial past like for instance Kalyani, Murshidabad, Plassey, Krishnagar, Bandel etc…. which were intimately connected with the British Raj as well as the Mughals. The introduction of exclusive Horse Riding Retreats in the above mentioned places would not only usher in an innovative tourism experience, it would also be a wonderful way of reviving the past glory of Bengal.

The Bengal hinterland is expansive with a diversity of environments ranging from green rolling fields to tropical forests. There will be no shortage of horse trails. The prospect of discovering rural Bengal through horse cart rides will make the tourists think that they are in another time and place.

The simple joys of indulging in picnic lunches and at the same time listening to the unique calls of the surrounding bushes or for that matter twilight rides where tourists are given a lifetime’s opportunity riding away into the sunset as the last golden rays wash across rural Bengal can be an experience worth every penny.

The Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal along with the local Municipal bodies may first identify the sites suitable for rural Horse Riding Retreats and then come up with a comprehensive tourism development plan.

4. Tree House Tourism:

Tree house recreation has of late made its mark as a much sought after alternative form of recreation. This concept has become hugely popular in the state of Kerala and
some parts of Rajasthan. In Kerala, the manner in which the educated unemployed have taken to pursue their new passion is indeed praiseworthy. In places like Vythiri, Mudumala, Munnar as well as in the district of Idukki, tree houses are selling like hot cakes which should be of great inspiration to their counterparts in West Bengal.

Even a decade back, tree houses used to be kid stuff, but not anymore as more adults are building houses in trees to get high. The joy of being tucked up in a remote arboreal hideaway is the stuff that dreams are made of and they have even been the subjects of best-selling books and popular exhibitions.

The ideal location for introducing Tree House Tourism would be the lush green Dooars region of North Bengal which is rife with game and some of the most haunting wilderness trails – the Mahananda-Jaldapara-Gorumara-Buxa Wildlife circuit will definitely provide the tourists with not only scenic jungle vistas but also dramatic wildlife encounters with the creatures of the wild.

The reserves teem with a bewildering variety of animals that snoop around adjacent villages and tea plantations. It is one of the last pockets left in India with a wild population of the elusive Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros. Native elephants and bison too are found in plenty.

Other places worthy of Tree House recreation are the tribal areas surrounding Jhargram hills in Paschim Medinipur district where the meandering Subarnarekha River and the profusion of forests can provide the ideal backdrop to the tree houses.

There is also Bethuadhari Reserve Forest in the district of Nadia, which is a pleasant place to relax in the midst of lush green forest cover, chirping of the birds and a few species of fauna like Spotted Deers, Pythons, Monitor Lizards and Turtles. The fact that the National Highway passes right next to the Bethuadari Reserve Forest and being easily accessible from Kolkata, Bethuadari Forest Reserve has always been an enigma for many weekender tourists.
5. Colonial Tourism in Kalyani:

The modern township of Kalyani is located at a distance of 48 Kms. from the City of Joy – Calcutta. This beautiful eco-friendly township was mooted at a time when the City of Joy – Calcutta was reeling under the pressure of the influx and the then Chief Minister of West Bengal – Bidhan Chandra Ray had dreamt of a satellite township to ease the population from the city and that is how Kalyani was born, phoenix-like, out of the ashes of World War II, at the site of what was once an American Base - Roosevelt Town, named after the late President of USA.

A leisurely stroll through the township reveals the Airforce Base at Kappa, the Military Barracks of Dharampur, the Uttarborath Army Hospital now rechristened as Netaji T.B. Hospital. There is even a well that was used by the American soldiers during their stay at Kalyani.

The government of West Bengal would do well to declare Kalyani as a colonial tourist destination. Given the fact that the Indo-US joint military initiatives are at an all time high, both the Indian army and its counterparts in USA would do well to cooperate in shaping up Kalyani as a much-preferred colonial tourist destination.

A few possible touristy landmarks for Kalyani are mentioned below –

(i) Setting up a War Memorial Center in Kalyani with photographs and pictures of World War II. Pictorial representation of India’s struggle for Independence.

(ii) Photographs, write-ups and audiovisuals etc…. depicting the Indo-US military exchanges till the present time.

(iii) Develop Kalyani Lake, which is 1.25 Kms. long into a state of the art Lake Retreat with luxurious accommodation units, convention center, musical fountain and all the modern paraphernalia expected of a super deluxe retreat.
(iv) Develop the Picnic Garden into a world class Botanical Garden with exclusive garden villas for up market tourists.

(6) Declare the District of Nadia as a Spiritual Tourist Destination:

As far as the question of spirituality is concerned, it would perhaps be apt to state that the district of Nadia has a great spiritual past and that great spiritual heritage and tradition of thousands of years is still alive. In fact, Nabadweep Dham, a small town of Nadia district happens to be the birthplace of one of India’s greatest spiritual personality – Sri Chaitainya Mahaprabhu who is regarded as the avatara of Lord Krishna in this age whose mission it was to teach love of god through chanting his holy name. Also in the district of Nadia is Mayapur where the headquarters of the world famous International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is located. The Hare-Krishna movement made so popular and acceptable in the modern era by one of the world’s most outstanding spiritual teachers - His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prbhupada has its magnificent headquarters at Mayapur, which is just 35 hors drive from Calcutta.

ISKCON in particular has mega tourism plans for Mayapur and Nabadweep Dham and the government can effectively play the role of a catalyst.

(7) Bengali Wedding Tours:

A Bengali marriage is always very special. It is high on drama, there is great pomp and merrymaking and the food is lip-smacking good. One has all the ingredients of a soap opera. The Municipalities and village panchayats may be given a grant to build community halls and the residents of the concerned town or village may be encouraged to hold marriage ceremonies at these community halls.
8. An integrated Pilgrim Tourism Circuit in the Abode of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa:

The Ramakrishna Mission is renowned the world over as a spiritual and philanthropic organization that dates back to 1897 and was started by the great Swami Vivekananda. Belur Math, the worldwide headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission is an international pilgrimage place along with the villages of Kamarpukur and Joyrambati. While Kamarpukur is the birthplace of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the nearby village of Joyrambati is the birthplace of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi who was the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna.

The Ramakrishna Math & Mission has been silently serving the country in various spheres like education, health, relief and rehabilitation, promoting Indian culture and tradition etc…through its vast network of branches spread all over India and abroad.

The government of West Bengal would do well to enter into a contract with Belur Math so as to facilitate “Volunteer Tourism”, which has now made its presence felt in the fast changing global tourism industry. Hundreds and thousands of devotees that include a sizeable section of NRIs, every year come to visit the hallowed Belur Math as well as the ancestral villages of Kamarpukur and Joyrambati. Most of them are attracted by the Ramakrishna’s Mission’s philosophy of “doing good to the world with a spirit of worship and thereby paving the path for one’s own salvation”.

Volunteer Tourism is essentially tourism with ethics. The volunteers abhor the very idea of experiencing an alien culture through the windows of a hotel room or bus. Today’s volunteer tourist is quite willing to part company with a 5 star hotel room for a night’s halt in a poor fisherman’s hut in one of the remotest corner of planet earth. As tourists they go back home with an experience that is elevating and that their holidays had a purpose, which no amount of Scuba Diving and Sunbathing could have bestowed.
As far as the villages of Kamarpukur and Joyrambati are concerned, there are opportunities galore for volunteer activities. There are many people from the affluent Western countries like USA, UK, Canada, Australia, France, the Netherlands etc….who are more than willing to offer their skill sets for the welfare of the poor and the needy.

The villages of Kamarpukur and Joyrambati have a unique traditional way of life, rich in culture, crafts and folklore, all of which would be of great interest to the discerning Volunteer Tourists.

The government of West Bengal with active support and co-operation of the Ramakrishna Mission would do well to perhaps launch an exclusive Volunteer Tourism Cell, which would act as single window platform for facilitating hassle free movement of Volunteer Tourists from the world over.

9. **Bengali Fairs & Festivals to be Promoted Aggressively:**

West Bengal is a land of festivals and fairs. Be it the Gangasagar Mela, the Poush Mela of Santineketan or the 300 years old Sati Ma’s Mela at Kalyani, West Bengal is never short of fairs and festivals. The Fairs and festivals of Bengal are unique and one-of-a-kind to be found nowhere else on earth.

The Indian state of Rajasthan has shown how by proper marketing and planned infrastructure developments, fairs and festivals can win the admiration of the world’s tourism fraternity. The world famous Pushkar Fair as well as the Jaisalmer Desert Festival are today ranked amongst the world’s most colorful fairs.

Given the plethora of fairs in West Bengal, the government needs to identify a few such fairs wherein the element of ethnicity and heritage is most profound and then go in for accelerated infrastructure developments.
There is a dearth of quality tourist accommodation in places of West Bengal where fairs are held. Most don’t even have the basics like comfortable rooms, clean linens and toilets. The need of the hour is to improve the infrastructure facilities in the form of tented accommodation, sanitary provisions and good hygienic food. Also, proper signages have to be put in place for the benefit of the tourists from abroad. Once the logistics are set right, it is only a matter of time that these colorful Bengali fairs will begin to cast their mesmerizing spell on the discerning international tourists.

The greatness, immensity and the sheer diversity of West Bengal come to light in these festivals. The USP of West Bengal’s fairs lie on the fact that most of them are sheer aesthetic feasts in which nature, religion and people have blended harmoniously. Most of them are traditional age-old festivals that have been celebrated by generations of Bengalis and yet they continue to appeal the outside world.

A realization has to dawn on the government that Fairs & Festivals serve as great PR tools for any tourist destination and helps in depicting the state’s cultural landscape in a rather profound manner. Not only this, fairs and festivals also leave an indelible mark on the people’s mind since everything is presented live in front of an audience, the impressions of which they carry with them to their respective countries and disseminate amongst their friends and relatives.

10. Son et lumiere on the Bengal Renaissance:

The renaissance period after the infamous 1857 rebellion against the British rule saw a spontaneous outburst of Bengali art and literature. It was during this period that the great spiritual giant Sri Ramakrishna made his appearance and it was left to Swami Vivekananda – the cyclonic monk of Bengal to spread the tentacles of Vedanta to the world community. This period also saw the emergence of great souls like Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Rishi Aurobindoo and others of their ilk.
It is high time the government comes up with a state-of-the-art “Son et lumiere” on the great Bengal Rennaisance which may be showcased in places like Nandan for the entertainment of the discerning international travelers. There are still many facts that the rest of the world doesn’t know about the Bengal Rennaissance, which may be unravelled in the true spirit of the renaissance to the new age traveller to Bengal.

**Conclusion:**

It is true that there are problems galore when it comes to developing the Tourism industry in a state like West Bengal. What is heartening though is that there seems to be an awareness in the minds of the people as well as of the government of West Bengal that everyone has to unite together, whether he or she is a sage or an ordinary person. With the people’s power and the power of grassroot institutions, the deteriorating tourism standards can be arrested and improved upon. Apart from the government, NGOs and International organizations also have to share the responsibility and help and guide the local citizenry in developing a sound and sustainable tourism platform for West Bengal.

One of the key areas in terms of tourism development in West Bengal is creation of a more appropriate form of tourism to replace “Mass Tourism”. Appropriate Tourism is a kind of tourism that is more favorable and beneficial to the local community and the challenge ahead for West Bengal’s tourism industry is to implement and establish Appropriate Tourism at the ground level.

The future relationship between tourism and environment is going to be the key issue for West Bengal’s tourism industry as it will be for the rest of India and the world. Being sensitive towards environment in our pursuit of pleasure in the hills and dales, beaches, grassland and fragile areas would be the wise thing to do.

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