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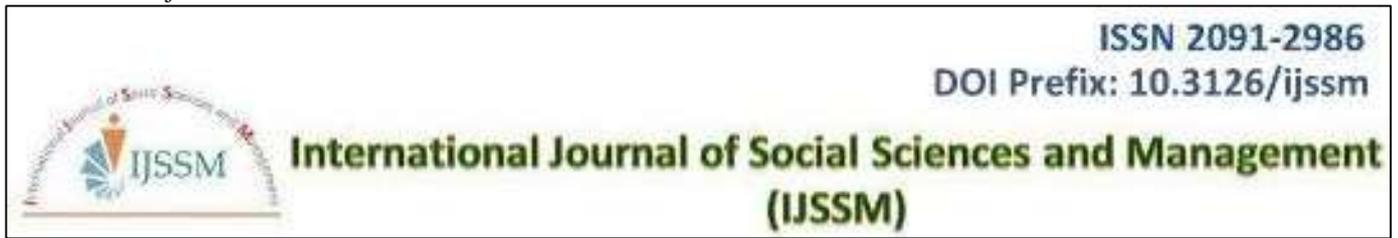
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## Research Article

# COASTAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN WEST BENGAL: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

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## Abstract

Coastal tourism has become a major facet of modern life. Further, tourism development in the coastal zone has become a constant since the end of World War II. Coastal tourism is a process involving tourists and the people and places they visit, particularly the coastal environment and its natural and cultural resources. Most coastal tourism takes place along the shore and in the water immediately adjacent to the shoreline. In India Goa, Kerala, Karnataka were emerged spontaneously as a coastal tourism destination in the 1960s, its unique selling points being its natural coastal beauty. But the history of coastal tourism is not very old in West Bengal. The coastal stretch of West Bengal with a length of about 350 kilometer comprises the two districts- Purba Medinipur and Dakshin Chabbisparagana. In West Bengal there are many popular coastal tourism destinations, but coastal tourism in West Bengal started in 1980s. Present study focuses on historical background and development of the coastal tourism destinations in West Bengal.

**Keywords:** Tourism; Coastal Environment; Tourism destination

## Introduction

The origins of tourism in coastal areas go back to Roman times, when the first villas were constructed in the Southern part of the Apennine peninsula. In the centuries that followed, especially from the mid-18th century onwards, coastal tourism was generally related to the therapeutic properties of sea and sun. Sun, sea and sand have continued to provide the main ingredients for coastal tourism until today, especially in the second half of the 20th century, which was marked by the development of mass tourism (Ghimire, 2013). In India Goa, Kerala, Karnataka were emerged spontaneously as a coastal tourism destination in the 1960s, its unique selling points being its natural coastal beauty. But the history of coastal tourism is not very old in West Bengal. The coastal stretch of West Bengal with a length of about 350 kilometer comprises the two districts- Purba Medinipur( East Midnapur) and Dakshin Chabbisparagana (South 24 Paraganas). In West Bengal there are many popular coastal tourism destinations, but coastal tourism in West Bengal started in 1980s. In West Bengal each coastal tourism destination has unique history. Following discussions have been made on the basis of literature review about the historical background and development of popular coastal tourism destinations in West Bengal (Mandal and Nandi, 1989).

## Objectives

1. To know the popular coastal tourism destinations in West Bengal.
2. To know the historical background and development of the coastal tourism destinations in West Bengal.

## Methodology

This study is based on secondary information and literature review. Information collected from research related articles, research paper, reports, published books etc. Secondary information also collected from different website related to the coastal area studies in West Bengal.

## Study area

The states of West Bengal are comprised of 19 districts including Kolkata. It lays between 21°55' N lat. to 26°50' N lat. & 86°30' E long. to 89°58' E long. respectively with an area about 88,752 sq km where the coastal stretch of West Bengal extends from the mouth of the river Subarnarekha on the West (bordering the state of Orissa) to the mouth of river Hanribhanga on the east (bordering Bangladesh) between longitude 87°30'E and latitude 21° 37.012'N to 89°30' E. and latitude 21°40.849'N respectively with a length about 350 km comprises the two districts-East Midnapore and South 24 Paraganas. The long coast line of

West Bengal along the Bay of Bengal is dominated by Ganga Delta which occupies around 60% of this coast line. Physiographical, the entire coastline may be subdivided into three principal coastal zones, such as: -

- a) From the mouth of Harinbhanga river to the mouth of Hugli river, known as the Sundarban Delta Zone” (Eastern sector)
- b) Saline tidal regime of the Hugli river, stretching up to Kulpi Point and the Haldia Port (Central Sector)
- c) Digha-Junput coastal plain along the sea (Western Sector).

But areas for intensive coastal tourism in West Bengal could be distinctly divided into two major zones, such as –

- i. Digha-Shankarpur zone in Purba Medinipur - District (Destination:-Digha / Shankarpur/ Tajpur /Mandarmoni/ Junput/Gopalpur)
- ii. Sundarban in South 24 Parganas District (Destination: - Sagar Island / Haribhanga Island / Bakkhali / Frazerganj / Henrys Island / Jambu Island / Kolas Island etc.)

## Historical Background of Coastal Tourism Destinations

### *Digha – Mandarmoni region*

Digha is a seaside resort city in the state of West Bengal, India. It lies in East Midnapore district and at the northern end of the Bay of Bengal. It has a low gradient with a shallow sand beach with gentle waves extending up to 7 km in length. It is the most popular sea resort in the West Bengal. The history of Digha as a seaside resort is not very old. During the 18th Century, Digha village was under the "Birkul Parganas". Digha is adorned by the virtue of her own natural beauty with the broad and vast blue sea and intoxicating rows of Casurina trees overlooking the sea. Digha is famous for its beach which is considered as the finest hard beach of the world. Sir Warren Hastings called Digha beach as the "Brighton of the East" (Wikipedia, 2015). Digha, the first beach tourist centre in West Bengal has a historical background and we got this particular name from the personal letters of Warren Hasting, who wrote to his wife about the appreciation of Digha Sea Beach. During the British colonial period this small village on the shore of the Bay of Bengal was rarely known to the outsiders and little number people visited this place (*Chakraborty et al., 2012*). Digha's official recorded history in the recent past started in 1770s when India's first Governor-General - Warren Hastings had made a mention of Digha as 'Brighton of the East' in his letters to his wife - Mary and other British officials. According to historical records, Mr Hastings, when he first visited Digha, which was then known as 'Beercool', was impressed by its flat, hard beaches and casuarinas trees, and wrote to his wife that

he had at last discovered the "Brighton sea beach" of his own country in Digha. In the recent time, Digha first came to knowledge of the People through Mr. J.F. Snaith, an English businessman who built a bungalow here during about 1939 and tried to popularise it through own endeavours. Afterwards, Digha caught the attention of Dr. B.C. Roy, the well renowned visionary and Chief Minister of West Bengal during 1950's who with his imagination took up all round development of Digha as a Tourist spot and as well as to help the growth of a new township at this charming sea resort. What we now see and enjoy at Digha is, definitely, the positive result of imagination and attribution of Dr. Roy who is called the father of Digha. Digha has been declared as a controlled area under the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Area (Use and Development of Land) Control Act, 1965 vide Notification No.5586-T & CP/3A-7/75 dated 16th September, 1975. Initially covering 16 mouzas (14.78 sq.km.) within Digha Police Station, the Planning Area was extended in 1991 to cover 26 additional mouzas of Digha and Ramnagar Police Stations including the sea beach adjoining the Shankarpur Fishing Harbour. The area was extended to cover 37 sq. km. The Land Use & Development Control Plan of the Digha Planning Area was finalised in July, 1997. The said Plan premises included, inter-alia, development of the Digha — Shankarpur Urban Centre into an attractive tourist resort with concomitant infrastructural facilities. The Plan also considered the requirements of the Coastal Zone Regulation of the Government of India so as to undertake eco-friendly approach to future developments (*Ramachandran et al., 2005*). Official records of DSDA shows that development activities related to tourism at Digha started in 1980s. Amarabati Park was commissioned in the year 1980-81 by the then Digha Development Scheme. It has, however, been brought to the ownership of this Authority. Kshanika (Day Trippers Centre) was constructed in the year 1982 by Digha Development Scheme for the Day Trippers Tourists. This unit has been leased out to Pvt. Concern. Nehru Maidan Market was created by the erstwhile Digha Development Scheme in the year 1984-85 with a view to rehabilitate the persons evicted from the Govt. lands and to provide the local unemployed youths for a source of livelihood in the spinet of Social justice. On merger of said erstwhile Digha Development Scheme with this Authority, the market has come under the Possession of Digha Sankarpur Development Authority. The Marine Aquarium and Research Centre (MARC) was established in the year 1989 during the Seventh Five Year Plan. The major objective of the Centre is to display the marine biodiversity of the region and impart its values to the common people and to carry out the research activities. For the Tourist's enjoyment, Toy Train project has been launched and started from October' 2008 through a Promoter. The Train is running around the Kajal Dighi Lake which is inside the Project. The area has been beautified by planting costly trees etc. There are free

rides for the children. In 2013-2014 Digha-Sankarpur Beachfront Area Development Plan has been taken by the Digha Sankarpur Development Authority under ICZM project funded by World Bank. Major objectives of this plan are protection of life and livelihoods of coastal communities, conservation of ecological resources, promotion of economic activities through sustainable coastal tourism development.

Mandarmani is a seaside resort village in the state of West Bengal, India, lies in East Midnaporedistrict and at the northern end of the Bay of Bengal. It is one of the large and fast developing seaside resort village of West Bengal. It is almost 180 km from Kolkata Airport on the Kolkata - Digha route. Red crabs crawling around the 13 km long beach is a special attraction of Mandarmani. It is argued to be the longest driveable beach in India. Initially, after its discovery, this beach was named Mandarboni. But with time it came to be known as Mandarmani.

Shankarpur is a virgin beach town located 14 km east of Digha in West Bengal. It is also a regular fishing harbor. The mornings are cool, when fishermen can be seen hauling their huge nets out of the sea. The morning sun reflecting on the sea waves in the east, and the local fish boats on the coast offer excellent photographic opportunities. For the development of Shankarpur as a tourist resort of international standards so as to attract the elite/up-market section of the tourists, the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal has undertaken ambitious plans over an approximate area of 1040 hectares. In addition, supporting tourism facilities like beach front recreation, water sports, cultural activities, etc. have also been contemplated. It is expected that the spill-over of high spending group of tourists can be comfortably absorbed by the proposed tourist resort at Shankarpur.

### **Bakkhali**

Bakkhali is seaside resort in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, India. It is located on one of the many deltaic islands spread across southern Bengal. Most of the islands are part of the Sunderbans, barring a few at the fringes. Some of these are joined together with bridges over narrow creeks. This small island juts out into the vast expanse of the Bay of Bengal. Nearly 100 years ago Andrew Fraser, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal explore this beautiful place & excellent beach previously known as Narayanitala, Which now famous as Freserganj. Lieutenants Governor Mr. Fraser popularize this place among the Europeans and tried to start a sanatorium here. But due to his early return to Europe his dream was not fulfilled. In the year 1972 Kashi Kanta Maitra, Honourable Minister of W.B. Govt. start a Govt. Tourist Lodge, named "Bakkhali Tourist Lodge" at Fradric Island on the eastern bank of a creak named "BAKKHALI". Thus the same sea beach famous in two names – 'FRESEGANJ' &

'BAKKHALI' the physical distance is approx 2 km only between the two spots. Gradually this place comes one of best sea beaches in India. At that time (year 1972) there was no proper road or communication to reach Bakkhali Tourist Lodge. There was narrow road from Namkhana to Freserganj with 4 small wooden bridges over different creeks. Only 3 buses were plying between the two places- Namkhana & Freserganj by 'Sundarban Transport Co-Operative Society'. Last 2 km road from Freserganj to Bakkhali was muddy. The Bakkhali Govt. Tourist Lodge start with only 3 wooden rooms (bungalow type) as dormitory & 12 tent (Double Bed). W.B.S.E.B. supply electricity for 4 hours at evening with a generator set. At that time a few local residents start to give shelter & food to the tourist in their dwelling hut without any type of toilet. Mr. Kalipada Samanta is one of them and honourable founder member of our association. In sixties decade at Freserganj Late Satish Sarder did the same thing. Once Mr. Banerjee (Ranger of Bakkhali forest) started a privet lodge for tourist with small wooden cottage with eight rooms without any type of floor named 'Balaka Lodge'. Later in 1987 it was handed over to 'Paul Chowdhury Brothers' Mr. Anil Paul Chowdhury is our one the honourable founder member, who made a new building in place of old wooden rooms. In the year 1979 'Sahana Tourist Lodge' was established. It was first break build lodge with thatched roof & sanitary toilet. Mr. S.K. Banerjee the owner of the lodge is also a founder member of the association. In the meantime Bakkhali linked with Freserganj by a metal road, and in 1980 Bus route extended up to Bakkhali with 5 buses. Now it is under National Highway Authority & from 'Kona Express way' of Howrah to Bakkhali (Via Joka, Amtala, Sirakol & Diamondhurbour, Kakdwip, Namkhana) it is now called NH 117. First important turning point of development Bakkhali tourist spot was established of a new modern hotel 'Bay View Tourist Lodge' by Late Ramchandre Das of Shibrampur, Behala. The first hotel with attached bath & own generator set in 1986. Now a day's different plan and activities has been taken by Sundarban Development Authority for overall development of the area under ICZM project funded by World Bank. Major objectives of this plan are protection of life and livelihoods of coastal communities, conservation of ecological resources, promotion of economic activities through sustainable coastal tourism development (Ghosh, 2014).

### **Sagar Island / Gangasagar**

Sagar Island is an island in the Ganges delta, lying on the continental shelf of Bay of Bengal about 100 km (54 nautical miles) south of Kolkata. It belongs to the Republic of India and is governed by the State government of West Bengal. This island, also known as Gangasagar or Sagaridwip, is a place of Hindu pilgrimage. Every year on the day of Makar Sankranti (14 January), hundreds of

thousands of Hindus gather to take a holy dip at the confluence of river Ganges and Bay of Bengal and offer prayers (puja) in the Kapil Muni Temple. The place is primarily important for its temple of the great saint Kapil Muni who according to myth was Vishnu, had taken birth as per the wish of Kardam muni as his son. It is told that Kardam had to go through a marital life as per the direction of Vishnu but he agreed in a condition that Vishnu has to take birth as his son and as per this condition Vishnu had taken birth as his son and he was Kapil Muni-one of the great saint of Hindu religious mythology. Kapil Muni's hermitage was present at the place of the present day Gangasagar. His mythological story is related with the bringing of Ganga – the sacred river, in this place. In the myth it is told that once during his religious austerity King Sagar's (the King of Ikshashu Vansh of Ayodhya) 60000 sons came down to the place of his hermitage in search of their father's sacrificial horse and found it there at that place. In fact the horse was stolen by Devraj Indra and it was hidden by him at Patal beside Kapil's hermitage. Sagar's sons blamed him for the stealing of that and interrupted in his religious meditation. Then the saint became very angry and his blaze of anger came out of his eyes which burnt all the 60000 sons of the King Sagar into ashes and consigned their souls to hell until Sagar's grandson whose name was Bhagirath brought down the Ganga- Vishnu's wife as per the direction of the Saint-Kapil from heaven. With the touch of holy water of Ganga all 60000 sons were released from the curse and liberated their souls. Cognitive view of the local people is that Ganga in this place is known as Sagar and the point of junction of the river and the sea at the Sagar Island is the celebrated seat of Hindu pilgrims (Maity, 2001). It is told that Sagar King's sons were liberated from curse on the day of Makar Sankranti (Saha, 1999). Due to this the day became a very auspicious day to the Hindu pilgrims. On that day pilgrims from all over India come to take bath in the Gangasagar to get rid of all the sins and simultaneously to earn virtue. They also offer puja to the great saint-Kapil in his temple which is run by the Ramanandi saints of the Hanuman garhi of Ayodhya. Initially one of the zamindars of the then Sagardwip—Jaduram migrated from Midnapur appointed a priest from that group of saint of Ayodhya and ultimately after sometimes they demanded and established their claim over the temple. According to them as the myth is related with Ayodhya and with the forefathers of Ram, it is their claim that they are the actual owner of the temple. During the time of holy bathing ceremony a large fair is held which is known as Gangasagar Mela. Except this great festival it is observed that throughout the year people come to visit the place primarily during different festive and ritual occasions and sometimes even when there is no such occasion. An integrated Eco-tourism development plan for Sagar Island has been prepared in 2013 under ICZM project. Sagar Island is at its first stage of tourism development circle, and it is

possible to say that “the Island is starting its tourism development, slowly”. Globally seen, Sagar Island is an appreciated religious destination able to attract tens of thousands of tourists / pilgrims within the year. This tourism is mainly concentrated during a very short time in January of each year (Ganga Sagar Mela), while during the rest of the year the flows are very limited, with the exception of other two minor fairs and other local and State events. This Ecotourism Development Plan shall be considered as an opportunity for Sagar Island to develop local economy through tourism, especially considering its integrated approach.

### ***Sundarban Region***

Sundarban, the largest delta in the world, consists of 10,200 sq km of Mangrove Forest, spread over India (4200 sq km of Reserved Forest) and Bangladesh (6000 sq km approx of Reserved Forest) and is also the largest Mangrove Forest in the world. Another 5400 sq km of non-forest, inhabited region in India, along the north and north-western fringe of mangrove forest, is also known as Sundarban region in India. Hence, the total area of Sundarban region in India is 9600 sq km which constitutes the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve. Indian Sundarban is bound on the west by river Muriganga and on the east by rivers Harinbaha and Raimangal. Other major rivers flowing through this ecosystem are Saptamukhi, Thakuran, Matla and Goasaba.

This unique natural zone also has a unique history. Various explanations have been offered about the origin of the name Sundarbans, which means “beautiful forests”. It is presumed that it derives from the Sundari trees (*Heritiera littoralis*) that grow in the region. The name is of relatively recent origin. There are a number of references to the Sundarbans in Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas, as well as Hiuen-Tsang (a Chinese traveller who visited India in the seventh century AD). In the seventh century, the area was probably part of the land of Samatata, which Hiuen-Tsang describes as a low lying country bordering on the sea and rich in crops. In medieval texts, lower Bengal is repeatedly called Bati or Bhati. In oral traditions and folk songs, the entire land mass extending from the eastern shores of Bhagirathi in the west to Chittagong in the east was referred to as Bangala or Bhati. A line in a folk song, “The long-bearded Bangal [a resident of eastern Bengal] has arrived from Bhati” (“Bhati haite aila bangal, lamba lamba dari”), refers specifically to the area that later came to be known as the Sundarbans (Mandal, 2003). In his work Akbarnamah, Abul Fazl also calls this coastland of the Bay of Bengal “bhati”. The term means “low tidal land” and thus does not in itself indicate that the area was originally covered with dense forests. Indeed, Niharranjan Roy cites sufficient evidence that many presently uninhabited parts of the Sundarbans were actually cultivated in the Middle Ages. Ralph Fitch, who toured this tract of country in 1586, describes it as fertile, with solidly built and lofty houses to

withstand the cyclones and storm-tides. In an influential essay on the Sundarbans published in 1875, William W. Hunter also opined that there were once numerous human settlements in several areas of the Sundarbans (Mandal and Ghosh, 1989). It is said that the actual ruler of the Sundarbans towards the end of the sixteenth century was Pratapaditya, one of a group of chiefs known as Barah Bhuiyas (the Twelve Chiefs), who were vassals of the Mughal emperors. Pratapaditya defied the authority of the Mughal emperor Akbar and established an independent stronghold in the swampy areas of southern Bengal. The name of Pratapaditya is associated with one of the founding myths of Bengali sub-nationalism. Much of this myth, however, may be of little historical substance. It appears that at some point in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries many areas in the coastal tract of the 24 Parganas were abandoned and overrun with forest and jungle owing to some disorder of a nature that is not clear to historians: it may have been either political or environmental. The flood of 1584 dislocated thousands of villages in this area and further grief was inflicted by Portuguese and Mag incursions. In Rennell's map (1761) the whole tract to the south of Bakharganj is described as "country depopulated by the Maghs". Incursions by pirates, whether Portuguese or native, may have thus played a significant role in the depopulation of this tract, along with devastations caused by cyclones and storm waves. The Portuguese, who occupied Tardaha on the Bidyadhari towards the end of the sixteenth century, combined piracy with trade. The whole Sundarbans area became a haven for Portuguese and Mag pirates. The Channel Creek, one of the important channels in the Sundarbans, came to be known as Rogues' River.

Like a product, every destination also goes through different stages of life cycle (Dasgupta, 2011). According to Butler (1980), destinations undergo an evolutionary cycle of six stages. These stages are critically analyzed below to find out the current stage of Sundarban in the TALC model. Theoretically, the exploration stage is characterized by the presence of a few adventurous tourists who are attracted to the area because of its unique and different natural & cultural attractions. Sundarban has been one of the few tourist destinations in the world symbolizing the largest single block of tidal halophytic mangrove forest (Pasha and Siddiqui, 2003). Consequently ever since its recognition as a tourist destination, it has attracted people in huge numbers. The period from 1860 (the year in which the systematic management of this forest tract started) to 1971 (the year in which Bangladesh attained independence) had not been a period of high tourist involvement. Local population and the people from surrounding areas formed the bulk of the tourists during this period. Moreover, the existing statistical data meant that a suitable period for a detailed analysis of this destination could only be from 2007 onwards (Laskar, 2010). Sundarban has always remained in

focus since its conception more than centuries ago. Thus the exploration stage is not applicable to this mangrove forest. This study suggests that the period from 1971 to 1997 can be considered as early involvement phase for this forest. The number of tourists, both domestic and foreign was not very high due to the limited accessibility and a lack of focus on tourism by the policymakers in the pre-independence era and then the immediate post-independent era as well as this mangrove forest was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 (UNESCO 2010, 2011). This marked a new chapter in the history of Sundarban and since then, there has been a gradual increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting it. The year 1997, thus, also signaled the beginning of the late involvement stage for Sundarban. The increase in number of tourists exerted pressure on the Government to provide infrastructural facilities for the development and projection of Sundarban as a tourist destination. The late 2000s and early 2009 period can be marked as the development phase for Sundarban. There were concerted efforts by the authorities to promote Sundarban. In the year 2009 Sundarban was in the final nomination list of the World's Top Seven Wonderers. The Governmental agencies and involved parties started participating and promoting Sundarban. Consequently, the number of local and foreign tourists visiting Sundarban showed a significant rise. The increase in the number of tourists during this period can also be attributed to the economic prosperity of India. Sundarban continues to be in the development stage.

## Conclusion

An overview of the above discussions about historical development and development of coastal tourism destinations in West Bengal revealed that 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). The history of coastal tourism is not very old in West Bengal. The coastal stretch of West Bengal with a length of about 350 kilometer comprises the two districts- Purba Medinipur ( East Midnapur) and Dakshin Chhobbisparagana ( South 24 Paraganas). In West Bengal there are many popular coastal tourism destinations, but coastal tourism in West Bengal started in 1980s. In 1980 Digha, Bakkhali, Frazergange were developed as a popular coastal tourism spots and Sundarban region was developed as a popular eco-tourism spot after 1985, when The Sundarban was listed under UNESCO World Heritage Site. Gangasagar Island was developed as a coastal tourism spot on the basis of Hindu religion and cultural history. For development of tourism, a Master Plan for the entire State is being prepared in phases which include the coastal areas of Sundarbans, Digha and Shankarpur (Mandal *et al.*, 2013). Potential investment projects for tourism related ventures in the coastal zone will cover creation of infrastructure / primary

facilities as well as secondary / support service and sub-products to be developed for the purpose. Towards this end, the Government of West Bengal have already initiated steps in the form of creation of new tourist accommodation at Jharkhali, L-Plot, Frasersgunj, Nimpith, Sagar Island, etc. and upgradation of existing accommodation facilities at Sajnekhali and Bakkhali Tourist Lodge in the Sundarbans (Mandal, 2004). A separate investment plan has been made for developing Diamond Harbour, Harwood Point and Namkhana as get-away destinations at a cost of Rs.50 crore.

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