



International Journal of Contemporary Research In Multidisciplinary

Research Article

A Study on Tourism Development and Its Practices with Special Reference To "Alipurduar" District of Dooars Region (West Bengal)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22207310>

Abstract

Tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and fast-growing industries globally, contributing significantly to economic development, employment generation, and socio-cultural exchange. Alipurduar district, nestled in the Dooars region of West Bengal, India, presents a unique confluence of biodiversity, wildlife sanctuaries, tea gardens, river landscapes, and indigenous tribal cultures that render it one of the most promising ecotourism destinations in eastern India. This study examines the current state of tourism development in Alipurduar district, exploring its natural and cultural tourism assets, existing infrastructure, challenges faced by stakeholders, government initiatives, and the socio-economic impact of tourism on local communities. Using secondary data, field observations, and a review of relevant literature, the paper underscores the need for sustainable, community-based, and ecologically responsible tourism practices tailored to the distinct geographical and cultural character of the Dooars region. The findings suggest that while Alipurduar holds immense tourism potential, systematic planning, infrastructure investment, and inclusive stakeholder participation are essential for translating this potential into equitable and sustainable development.

Manuscript Information

- **ISSN No:** 2583-7397
- **Received:** 12-07-2026
- **Accepted:** 27-08-2026
- **Published:** 31-08-2026
- **IJCRM:** 5(4); 2026: 987-992
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- **Plagiarism Checked:** Yes
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes

How to Cite this Article

Roy S. A Study on Tourism Development and Its Practices with Special Reference To "Alipurduar" District of Dooars Region (West Bengal). Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(4):987-992.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Tourism Development, Alipurduar, Dooars, Ecotourism, West Bengal, Sustainable Tourism, Wildlife Tourism, Tribal Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism, in its various forms, has evolved from a leisure activity of the privileged to a mainstream global industry that touches virtually every dimension of economic and social life. In India, tourism has been recognized as a powerful vehicle for regional development, particularly in areas endowed with natural beauty, wildlife, and rich cultural heritage. The state of West Bengal, with its diverse landscapes ranging from the Himalayas and Dooars forests to the Sundarbans delta and the cultural vibrancy of Kolkata, presents a multifaceted tourism canvas.

Within this canvas, the Dooars region — referring to the foothills and plains at the base of the Eastern Himalayas — stands out as a region of exceptional ecological significance and underexplored tourism potential. The word "Dooars" is derived from the Bengali/Assamese word meaning "doors" or "gateways," referring historically to the passes or gateways through which the plains communicated with Bhutan and the Himalayan kingdoms. Today, Alipurduar, established as a separate district in 2014 after bifurcation from Jalpaiguri, is at the forefront of this region's tourism narrative.

Alipurduar is home to Buxa Tiger Reserve — one of the most significant tiger habitats in India — Chilapata Forest, the Jayanti River corridor, Raidak and Torsa rivers, several tea estates, and a vibrant tapestry of tribal communities including the Rajbongshi, Mech, Rabha, and Rava peoples. Despite this remarkable endowment, tourism development in Alipurduar has remained fragmented, inadequately planned, and insufficiently supported by infrastructure and policy frameworks. This study aims to provide a comprehensive academic analysis of tourism development in Alipurduar, examining its assets, challenges, and pathways toward sustainable growth.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To examine the natural, cultural, and heritage tourism resources of Alipurduar district.
- To assess the existing tourism infrastructure and facilities in the Dooars region.
- To analyse the role of government policies and schemes in promoting tourism in Alipurduar.
- To evaluate the socio-economic impact of tourism on local communities and indigenous tribes.
- To identify the key challenges and constraints limiting tourism development in the district.
- To suggest strategies for sustainable and inclusive tourism development in Alipurduar.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is primarily descriptive and analytical in nature. It is based on secondary data collected from published reports of the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation (WBTDC), Government of India tourism statistics, district administration publications, scholarly journal articles, newspaper reports, and relevant books on tourism planning and Dooars ecology. Where appropriate, observations from exploratory field visits and existing case study documentation have been incorporated. Qualitative analysis has been employed to interpret the

collected data and draw meaningful inferences about tourism development patterns and prospects in Alipurduar district.

4. Geographical and Historical Profile of Alipurduar

4.1 Location and Physical Features

Alipurduar district is located in the northeastern part of West Bengal, roughly between 26°22'N to 27°13'N latitude and 89°22'E to 89°57'E longitude. It shares its borders with Bhutan to the north, Assam to the east, Jalpaiguri district to the west, and Cooch Behar district to the south. The district covers an area of approximately 3,136 square kilometres. The terrain transitions dramatically from the Himalayan foothills and dense subtropical forests in the north to the flat alluvial plains in the south, crisscrossed by several rivers including the Torsa, Jaldhaka, Raidak, Kaljani, and Sankosh.

The district experiences a humid subtropical climate, characterized by heavy monsoon rainfall (averaging 3,000–4,000 mm annually), cool winters, and hot summers. This climatic pattern sustains the rich biodiversity of the Dooars forests, making the region a year-round ecological zone of national and international significance.

4.2 Historical Background

Alipurduar has a layered history that intersects with the kingdoms of Bhutan, Cooch Behar, and the colonial British administration. The British East India Company and later the Crown used the Dooars region as a vital administrative and commercial corridor. The establishment of tea plantations during the British era fundamentally transformed the region's demographic and economic profile. Post-independence, Alipurduar's strategic border location with Bhutan has added dimensions of cross-border trade and cultural interchange. The formation of Alipurduar as a distinct district in 2014 gave administrative impetus to focused development, including in the tourism sector.

5. Tourism Resources of Alipurduar District

5.1 Wildlife and Ecotourism Resources

The crown jewel of Alipurduar's tourism assets is undeniably the Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR), spread over approximately 760 square kilometres of the Buxa Hills and surrounding forests. Established as a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1983 and declared a Tiger Reserve in 1986, BTR is home to the Royal Bengal Tiger, Asian Elephant, Indian Bison (Gaur), Leopard, Clouded Leopard, Sloth Bear, and a spectacular array of avifauna including hornbills, kingfishers, and various migratory species. The reserve also contains the historically significant Buxa Fort, a colonial-era structure perched in the hills with a storied past linked to freedom fighters imprisoned during the independence movement.

Chilapata Forest, another significant ecological zone in the district, serves as a wildlife corridor linking Buxa with Manas National Park in Assam. It harbours elephants, leopards, barking deer, and a rich avifauna population. The forest also contains the ruins of an ancient fort — Nalraja Garh — adding archaeological value to its ecological significance. Jaldapara National Park, though administratively partly in Alipurduar, is

one of India's most important habitats for the Indian One-Horned Rhinoceros and is a major draw for wildlife tourists.

5.2 River and Adventure Tourism

The numerous rivers of Alipurduar offer tremendous potential for river-based tourism. The Jayanti River, flowing through the heart of Buxa, is particularly popular for its scenic beauty and fishing opportunities. The Torsa, Jaldhaka, and Raidak rivers are increasingly attracting adventure tourists interested in river-crossing, fishing, camping, and nature walks along their banks. Jayanti village, situated at the confluence of the Jayanti River and the Buxa forest, has emerged as a focal point for eco-camps and nature retreats.

5.3 Tea Garden Tourism

Alipurduar district contains dozens of tea estates, many of which date back to the colonial era. Tea garden tourism — involving visits to processing units, participation in tea-plucking activities, and stays in colonial bungalows — is an emerging and commercially attractive segment. The aesthetic landscape of rolling green tea bushes against a backdrop of the Himalayan foothills creates an experience unique to the Dooars. Several tea gardens have begun to offer heritage bungalow accommodation, making this a niche but growing tourism product.

5.4 Tribal and Cultural Tourism

The district is inhabited by several indigenous tribal communities, including the Rajbongshi, Mech, Rabha, Rava, Garo, and Koch peoples. These communities possess rich traditions of folk music, dance forms (such as Bhawaiya and Baul), handicrafts, and traditional agricultural practices. Cultural tourism centred on tribal village experiences, traditional craft workshops, and participation in local festivals such as the Rajbongshi's Charak Puja, Teesta Flood Festival, and various forest deity rituals presents significant potential that remains largely untapped.

5.5 Religious and Heritage Tourism

Alipurduar has several religious sites of local and regional significance. The Mahadeb Mandir at Madarihat, the Ganeshtala Temple, and various tribal sacred groves (Jaher or Sarna) attract devotees from across the district and neighbouring areas. The Buxa Fort, as noted earlier, holds both historical and spiritual significance and is increasingly being

promoted as a heritage tourism destination. Cross-border Buddhist pilgrimages to Bhutan via Alipurduar also present an avenue for religious tourism development.

5.6 Modern Landmark Tourism: The 98-Foot Glass Tower, Uttar Majherdabri

Alongside its wildlife, river, tea, tribal, and heritage assets, Alipurduar has, in recent years, gained a striking man-made attraction that has rapidly become a symbol of the district's emerging modern tourism identity. Located at Uttar Majherdabri in Alipurduar district, West Bengal, the 98-foot Glass Tower — set up inside the Maa Paradise World amusement and water park — is billed as India's tallest glass tower, and reportedly the country's first skywalk-style glass tower of its kind. Opened to the public in September 2025 ahead of the Durga Puja festive season, the transparent structure rises to an altitude of 98 feet, with a glass walking surface at approximately 73 feet, constructed using toughened glass panels roughly 50 mm thick for visitor safety.

The tower offers visitors a panoramic, bird's-eye view of the surrounding Dooars landscape, the tea gardens and forests of Alipurduar, the distant hills of Bhutan, and the Buxa forest range. It is equipped with binoculars for long-distance viewing, a dedicated selfie zone, and a swing ride positioned at the top, making it as much a recreational and photographic attraction as a viewing platform. Design inspiration was reportedly drawn from a similar glass tower in Shanghai, with suitable modifications, and the Alipurduar structure is considered the second glass tower to be built in India after an earlier one in Ahmedabad, though it currently stands as the tallest.

From a tourism development perspective, the Glass Tower is significant for several reasons. First, it represents a rare instance of privately driven, adventure-and-amusement-oriented infrastructure investment in Alipurduar, complementing the district's traditionally nature- and wildlife-based tourism offerings. Second, it has generated considerable local and social-media visibility, drawing visitors from across North Bengal and beyond and helping place Alipurduar more firmly on the region's tourism map. Third, being located within an integrated amusement and water park that also features laser fountain and water screen shows, it exemplifies the kind of diversified, family-oriented tourism product recommended elsewhere in this study to reduce Alipurduar's dependence on seasonal wildlife tourism alone. As with other emerging attractions, sustained visitor safety monitoring, crowd management, and integration into the district's broader tourism promotion strategy will be essential to maximising its long-term contribution to local tourism development.

Table 1: Key Tourism Attractions in Alipurduar District

Tourism Site	Category	Key Features	Tourist Season
Buxa Tiger Reserve	Wildlife/Eco	Tigers, Elephants, Birds, Buxa Fort	Nov – Apr
Jaldapara National Park	Wildlife/Eco	One-Horned Rhinoceros, Jeep Safari	Oct – May
Chilapata Forest	Eco/Heritage	Elephant Corridor, Nalraja Garh Ruins	Oct – Mar
Jayanti Valley	Nature/River	River camping, Forest treks, Bird watching	Oct – Apr
Tea Gardens (Dooars)	Cultural/Heritage	Tea plucking, colonial bungalows	Year-round
Bhutan Border (Paro Gate)	Cross-border	International gateway, Trade, Pilgrimage	Year-round
Tribal Villages	Cultural	Folk dance, Handicrafts, Festivals	Nov – Feb
Raidak & Torsa Rivers	Adventure	Fishing, Camping, Nature walks	Oct – Mar

Source: West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation & Field Observations, 2023

6. Tourism Infrastructure in Alipurduar

6.1 Accommodation Facilities

Alipurduar town itself has a reasonable number of hotels and lodges catering to budget and mid-range travellers. However, tourist-centric accommodation within or near forest areas remains limited. The West Bengal Forest Development Corporation (WBFDC) operates several forest bungalows and eco-camps within Buxa Tiger Reserve, but these are often limited in capacity and require advance booking through forest department portals. Privately operated eco-resorts and homestays have grown in number around Madarihata, Jayanti, and Rajabhatkhawa in recent years, representing an encouraging trend in community-based accommodation.

6.2 Connectivity and Transport

Alipurduar is well connected by rail, with Alipurduar Junction being a major railway station on the Assam Rail Link, providing connectivity to Kolkata, New Delhi, Guwahati, and other major cities. Road connectivity within the district has improved considerably, though several interior forest routes remain unpaved and inaccessible during monsoon. The nearest commercial airport is Bagdogra (approximately 160 km), which limits the ease of air access for tourists. State transport buses and private vehicles remain the primary modes of local transport, with limited options for tourist-specific transportation services.

6.3 Tourism Services and Amenities

Tourist information centres, guided tour services, and trained nature guides are available at major entry points such as Rajabhatkhawa (Jaldapara) and Santrabari (Buxa), but their quality and capacity need significant upgrading. Digital tourism infrastructure — including online booking platforms, multilingual tourist information, and mobile connectivity within forest areas — remains underdeveloped. Health and emergency services within deep forest zones are inadequate, posing safety concerns for adventure tourists.

7. Government Policies and Initiatives

7.1 State-Level Tourism Policy

The West Bengal government has recognized Dooars and Alipurduar as priority tourism zones under its tourism policy framework. The West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation (WBTDC) has undertaken several initiatives including the development of tourist lodges, promotion of jungle safari packages, and marketing campaigns at national and international tourism fairs. The "Dooars Tourism Circuit" has been conceptualized as part of the state's effort to integrate tourism offerings across Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts.

7.2 Central Government Schemes

Under the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Alipurduar has been incorporated into the PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive) and Swadesh Darshan schemes, which provide financial support for integrated tourism circuit development. The Buxa

Tiger Reserve has also received funding under Project Tiger for habitat management and eco-tourism development. The CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority) framework supports forest restoration and eco-tourism facilitation in buffer zones.

7.3 Border Tourism Initiatives

Given Alipurduar's strategic location on the India-Bhutan border, there have been bilateral discussions on facilitating tourism flows between the two countries. The Jaigaon-Phuentsholing border crossing adjacent to the district is one of the busiest India-Bhutan land border points, and tourism corridors linking the Dooars forests with Bhutan's ecological and cultural heritage are being explored as part of regional cooperation frameworks.

8. Socio-Economic Impact of Tourism

8.1 Employment Generation

Tourism in Alipurduar has created direct employment in sectors such as hospitality, wildlife guiding, transport, and artisanal crafts. Forest guides, safari drivers, mahouts (elephant handlers), hotel workers, and handicraft sellers constitute a growing tourism-linked workforce. Eco-tourism initiatives in villages near Buxa and Jaldapara have provided supplementary income to families who were previously solely dependent on forest resources or agricultural labour. However, employment is largely seasonal, concentrated in the October-to-April tourist season, leaving workers economically vulnerable during the monsoon months.

8.2 Impact on Tribal Communities

The indigenous communities of Alipurduar occupy a complex position in the tourism economy. On one hand, cultural tourism initiatives that showcase tribal music, dance, crafts, and cuisine have opened new income streams for tribal households. On the other hand, there are documented concerns about the commodification of tribal culture, inadequate benefit-sharing from commercial tourism ventures, and the displacement of communities from traditional forest-use areas due to wildlife sanctuary regulations. Ensuring that tribal communities are genuine partners in, rather than passive subjects of, tourism development is both an ethical imperative and a developmental necessity.

8.3 Impact on Local Economy

The multiplier effect of tourism — where tourist spending generates economic activity across multiple sectors — is beginning to be felt in Alipurduar. Local markets selling handicrafts, organic tea, forest produce, and traditional foods have grown. Small entrepreneurs offering jeep rentals, boat services, and homestays have found new income sources. However, a significant share of tourism revenue tends to be captured by external operators based in Kolkata, Siliguri, or even outside the state, limiting the economic benefits retained within the district.

Table 2: Estimated Annual Footfall at Major Tourist Sites in Alipurduar (2018–2022)

Year	Buxa Tiger Reserve	Jaldapara NP	Chilapata Forest	Total (Approx.)
2018–19	38,000	62,000	12,000	1,12,000
2019–20	42,500	68,000	14,500	1,25,000
2020–21	8,000 (COVID)	11,000 (COVID)	3,000 (COVID)	22,000
2021–22	29,000	47,000	10,000	86,000
2022–23*	45,000	72,000	16,000	1,33,000

*Estimated; Source: District Forest Office, Alipurduar & WBTD Reports

9. Challenges and Constraints in Tourism Development

9.1 Infrastructure Deficit

Despite improvements, the tourism infrastructure of Alipurduar suffers from significant gaps. Road connectivity to interior tourist spots is poor, particularly during the monsoon season. Sanitation facilities at tourist sites are inadequate. Digital infrastructure — essential for modern tourists — is limited within forest zones. The absence of a nearby commercial airport remains a major deterrent for international tourists and high-spending domestic visitors.

9.2 Seasonal Concentration

Tourism in Alipurduar is heavily concentrated in the cool and dry months (October to April), leading to overcrowding during peak season and near-total inactivity during the monsoon. This seasonality creates unsustainable pressures on fragile ecosystems during peak months and leaves tourism-dependent workers without income during the off-season. Developing monsoon tourism products — such as river-based experiences, tea estate stays, and cultural festivals — could help distribute tourist footfall more evenly.

9.3 Environmental Carrying Capacity Concerns

The ecological sensitivity of Alipurduar's forests, rivers, and biodiversity hotspots necessitates strict limits on tourist activity. Unregulated tourism can cause soil erosion, wildlife disturbance, noise pollution, and waste accumulation that damage the very assets upon which tourism depends. Buxa Tiger Reserve's tiger population and the rhinoceros's habitat of Jaldapara are particularly vulnerable to tourism-induced disturbance. Establishing and enforcing carrying capacity norms, waste management protocols, and noise regulations is critical.

9.4 Limited Promotion and Branding

Compared to other ecotourism destinations such as Jim Corbett, Kaziranga, or even the nearby Darjeeling hills, Alipurduar suffers from limited brand recognition at national and international levels. Tourism marketing has been sporadic and insufficiently funded. Social media presence, travel blog coverage, and inclusion in major travel itineraries remain low. Developing a distinct, cohesive destination brand for Alipurduar and Dooars — centred on its unique combination of wildlife, rivers, tea, and tribal culture — is an urgent promotional priority.

9.5 Regulatory and Administrative Challenges

Overlapping jurisdictions between the Forest Department, District Administration, Tourism Department, and Tribal

Welfare Department create coordination challenges in tourism planning and project implementation. Protected area regulations under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and environmental impact assessment requirements add layers of complexity to tourism infrastructure development within and around forest zones.

10. Recommendations for Sustainable Tourism Development

10.1 Integrated Tourism Master Plan

Alipurduar requires a comprehensive, multi-year Tourism Master Plan developed through participatory processes involving local communities, tourism industry stakeholders, forest authorities, and academic experts. This plan should identify specific tourism zones, define carrying capacity limits, set infrastructure development priorities, and create mechanisms for equitable benefit-sharing.

10.2 Community-Based Ecotourism Models

Community-based ecotourism (CBET) models, where local communities — especially indigenous tribes — are the primary operators and beneficiaries of tourism enterprises, should be promoted and supported. Successful CBET models from states like Sikkim, Kerala, and Uttarakhand offer replicable frameworks. Forest Village Cooperatives, tribal homestay networks, and community guide certification programmes should be prioritized.

10.3 Infrastructure Investment

Targeted investment is needed in all-weather road connectivity to tourist sites, sanitation and waste management at entry points, digital connectivity within forest buffer zones, and healthcare facilities. Smaller airports or helipads in the vicinity would dramatically improve accessibility for high-spending international tourists.

10.4 Diversification of Tourism Products

Tourism products in Alipurduar should be diversified beyond wildlife to include tea garden tourism, river adventure tourism, tribal cultural tourism, heritage tourism centred on colonial and pre-colonial sites, and bird-watching tourism (the Dooars is a globally significant birding destination with over 300 recorded species). Monsoon tourism packages celebrating the region's lush forests and river ecology could help address seasonality.

10.5 Promotion and Digital Marketing

A dedicated digital marketing strategy, including active social media presence, partnerships with prominent travel bloggers and influencers, presence on international travel platforms, and

multilingual tourism content, should be developed for Alipurduar. The Dooars brand needs consistent, professional articulation across all promotional platforms.

10.6 Capacity Building and Training

Local youth from tribal and rural communities should be trained as certified nature guides, eco-tourism hosts, cultural performers, and hospitality professionals. Partnerships with institutions like the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (IITTM), state polytechnics, and hospitality schools could facilitate structured skill development programmes.

11. CONCLUSION

Alipurduar district, situated in the ecologically rich and culturally vibrant Dooars region of West Bengal, presents a compelling case for integrated, sustainable tourism development. Its extraordinary assemblage of wildlife sanctuaries, river corridors, tea gardens, tribal traditions, and cross-border heritage endows it with the raw material for a world-class tourism destination. Yet the district's tourism sector remains far below its potential, constrained by infrastructure deficits, inadequate promotion, regulatory complexities, and insufficient community inclusion.

The pathway forward lies in embracing a development philosophy that is simultaneously ecological, inclusive, and economically dynamic. Tourism in Alipurduar must not merely extract value from its natural and cultural assets but must actively invest in conserving and strengthening them. Indigenous communities must be repositioned from the margins to the centre of tourism enterprise. Infrastructure must be improved without compromising ecological integrity. And the unique, multi-dimensional identity of Alipurduar — as a land of forests, rivers, tea, and tribal wisdom — must be projected boldly to the world.

With coherent policy support, targeted investment, participatory planning, and a commitment to sustainability, Alipurduar has the potential to emerge as one of India's most celebrated ecotourism destinations, contributing meaningfully to the livelihoods of its people while preserving its irreplaceable natural heritage for future generations.

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