

# Tourism and Politics in Himalaya and Adjacent Districts of North Bengal

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## Abstract

Tourism in North Bengal has emerged as a multidimensional development and political strategy that integrates the region's diverse geographical, cultural and historical assets. Spread across the Himalayan districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, the fostered regions of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar, the royal Heritage of Cooch Behar. North Bengal presents unique opportunities for eco-tourism, heritage tourism, adventure tourism and cultural tourism. Government policies have focused on upgradation of infrastructure, construction of tourist lodges, promotion of tourism villages and establishment of eco-friendly homestays, particularly in Alipurduar and the Dooars. Special attention has been given to heritage conservation in Cooch Behar, supported by new connectivity projects like rail links and scenic tourist trains. Tourism in North Bengal is closely linked with political image-building and regional identity formation. In areas like Darjeeling and Kalimpong tourism policies are often shaped to support ethnic and cultural narratives, while in Alipurduar, tribal participation in eco-tourism has been emphasized as a model of inclusive growth. Across the region, tourism serves as a political tool to project development, secure electoral support and promote local leadership. Through a combination of sustainable practices, community involvement, infrastructural investment and promotional strategies, the tourism landscape of North Bengal today stands as a critical intersection of economic planning, cultural revival, social inclusion and political symbolism.

**Key Words:** Tourism Development, Political Image, Regional Identity, Eco-Tourism, Community-Based Tourism, Public-Private Partnership (PPP)

## 1. Introduction

The notable international agency, The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in its global code of Ethics for Tourism stated tourists' right to travel as global. It defines the right to tourism as 'a right equally open to all inhabitants of the world' and it supports the 'liberty of tourist movements' (Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, 2005). In other words, 'travelling is a basic human right that augments the quality of life. UNWTO insists on the significant role a government can play in terms of easing tourist activities within their territories and beyond by guaranteeing its citizens the right to mobility.

The tourism industry is a major economic, environmental and socio-cultural force and according to Richter (1982), tourism is "a highly political phenomenon". Tourism is becoming an inclusive terrain of public policy domain, especially in third-world countries. However, if we compare with third-world countries, governments of first and second world countries are much into national security, both internal and external, economy, literacy and public health. Therefore, development policy studies have also focused accordingly.

Tourism in North Bengal plays a vital role in the region's economy, society and politics, standing as one of the most strategically developed sectors in the state of West Bengal. This geographically diverse region comprises the Himalayan districts of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar. Each of these districts offers a distinct tourism experience, ranging from the snow-capped mountains and tea-gardens to dense forests, royal palaces, archaeological sites and riverine landscapes. In recent years, the West Bengal government has adopted region-specific tourism policies to harness this diversity. While the focus in the Himalayan and Dooars regions remains on eco-tourism, adventure tourism, plantation tourism and infrastructure upgradation.

North Bengal's tourism development has a deeper political dimension. Tourism is actively used as a tool for creating political images, promoting local leadership and strengthening regional identities, particularly in politically sensitive areas like Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Alipurduar. The introduction of community-based tourism models, investments in the preservation of ethnic and historical legacies, the promotion of homestays in tribal areas and the development of eco-friendly resorts within tea gardens all reflect the government's attempt to merge economic growth with cultural and political objectives. Recent initiatives such as the Vistadome trains, development of tourist villages, integrated publicity campaigns and public-private partnerships further demonstrate the dynamic and evolving nature of the tourism sector in North Bengal.

Thus, tourism in North Bengal today is not only a major economic driver but also a powerful instrument of political negotiation, cultural assertion and regional empowerment, making it an essential component of both development policy and political discourse in the region.

## 2. Territorial Identity

Eight northern districts of West Bengal, namely, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Uttar Dinajpur and Maldah comprise North Bengal, a region formed due to the cutoff from South Bengal by the river Ganga. The region is bordered by Sikkim and Bhutan in the north; the eastern side is bounded by Assam and Bangladesh whereas Murshidabad district of West Bengal determines the southern limit of the region and the western boundary is formed by Bihar. The North Bengal is full of diversity. There are hills in the north, foothill regions and plains in the south. North Bengal is the **Gateway of North East India**. North Bengal is known for its diverse landscape, which draws tourists to its Himalayan foothills, dense forests, sprawling tea gardens and abundant wildlife. Spread across northern part of West Bengal, the region combines scenic beauty with cultural heritage, making it a favoured destination for visitors from both India and Abroad. In this article, I will discuss tourism and politics in the five districts namely, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar of West Bengal. This article examines how political factors influence tourism in North Bengal.

## 3. Tourism in Political Discourse

M. F. Lanfant and M. Graburn in an article on **'International Tourism Reconsidered: The Principal of the Alternative'** published in 1992, mentioned that tourism is just not a matter of national growth, but must be conceptualized as part of International Relations. In fact, tourism has become an integrated component of not only international relations but also of the international politics which governs these relations, particularly in the era of globalisation. According to C. M. Hall in his book **'Tourism and Politics: Policy, Power and Place'** in 1994, **"Tourism is inseparable from the field of international relations."**

The of tourism in North Bengal is a complex interplay of ethnic identity, regional autonomy, economic interests and environmental sustainability. North Bengal, particularly, the Darjeeling Hills, Kalimpong and Terai and Dooars regions, is not only a prominent tourist destination but also a politically sensitive area due to long standing demands for Gorkhaland, a separate state for the Gorkha community. The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), a key political actor, has often leveraged tourism-related shutdowns and strikes or bandhs as a tool to assert political demands, significantly impacting the local economy that heavily depends on tourism. Moreover, the tourism sector is often seen by local stakeholders as being dominated by external players and government-controlled agencies, leading to tensions over revenue sharing, employment opportunities and control over local resources. The West Bengal government's policies to develop mega-tourism, especially in the Dooars region, sometimes clash with the interests of indigenous groups like the Rajbanshis, Adivasis and Lepchas, who fear displacement and cultural erosion. Furthermore, the political instability caused by intermittent agitations for Gorkhaland has led to fluctuating tourist inflow, creating a fragile economy susceptible to political events. Environmentalists have also raised concerns over the unregulated expansion and tourism infrastructure, which threatens the delicate Himalayan ecosystem. In essence, the politics of tourism in North Bengal is not merely about promoting the region as a travel destination but is deeply linked to struggles over identity, autonomy, equitable development and environmental conservation.

#### 4. Tourism as an Instrument of Politics

Tourism in North Bengal holds a distinctly political character that sets it apart from tourism in the rest of West Bengal. While tourism across the state is a significant economic activity, in North Bengal, it is deeply embedded within the region's identity politics, ethno-regional movements and demands for political autonomy. In the plains of West Bengal such Kolkata, the Sundarbans and coastal areas like Digha and Mandarmani- tourism is largely a sector of economic development with relatively stable state control and limited direct political mobilisation around it. In contrast, in North Bengal, especially, in the Darjeeling Hills, Kalimpong and Dooars, tourism is frequently used as a political leverage point by local actors.

The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) and other hill based political organizations have consistently recognised the tourism industry's importance in the local economy and have deliberately targeted it through strikes and shutdowns during peak seasons to attract the attention of both the state and central governments. These Bandhs not only disrupt the revenue flow but also several as strategic symbol of protest and resistance in the larger Gorkhaland Movement. In the rest of circuits, tourism is rarely weaponised in this way. Even when protest occur in Kolkata or the Sundarbans, they typically focus on civic, environmental or livelihood issues and rarely aim to deliberately cripple the tourism economy as a means of political bargaining.

Furthermore, the politics of representation and control over tourism benefits plays out differently in North Bengal compared to the southern parts of the state. In regions like Kolkata and Digha, tourism policies and infrastructure development are largely managed by state agencies with minimal resistance. However, in North Bengal, local communities- especially the Gorkhas, Lepchas and Adivasis are actively demand greater decentralized control over tourism revenues and decision making. There is a persistent sentiment in the hills that the state government reaps disproportionate benefits from the tourism sector without adequate investment in local development.

The ethnic dimension of tourism politics is another point of contrast. In North Bengal, tourism is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity and territorial aspirations, as seen in the repeated mobilisations for

Gorkhaland. Even tourism promotion is contested, as regional leaders often advocate for branding that emphasises their unique cultural heritage rather than state centric narratives. In contrast, in the rest of West Bengal, tourism promotion typically revolves around heritage like Kolkata's colonial past; religious circuits like Tarapith, Dakshineswar; and coastal leisure, without the added layer of ethnic self-assertion. Environmental politics also intersect with tourism differently. While Sundarbans face environmental degradation due to unregulated tourism, the issue remains largely within the realm of policy debates. In North Bengal environmental concerns- particularly in the fragile Himalayan ecosystem are often politicised by local groups who see large scale tourism projects as threats to both their livelihoods and cultural integrity.

Tourism in North Bengal operates as a dynamic political tool. It is used to negotiate autonomy, express resistance and demand resource control, making it a central component of regional politics. By contrast, in the rest of West Bengal, tourism primarily serve as an engine for economic growth with far less direct political entanglement. This contrast highlights the unique political geography of North Bengal, where tourism is not merely about visitors and infrastructure, but is intimately tied to questions of identity, governance and power.

## 5. Creating Political Image

Many countries in the world use tourism as a tool for image creation. Political images also have an impact on tourism flows. Terrorism and war have a direct bearing on tourism as peace is essential for tourism. Tourists generally avoid areas infested with war, terrorism and political upheaval. Political stability at any destination is the key word for promoting tourism. The creation of political images through tourism in the Himalayan and adjacent districts of North Bengal has become a significant strategy for both the state and local political actors. Tourism is not merely an economic activity here; it is deeply embedded in the politics of identity, regional autonomy and cultural assertion. In districts like Darjeeling and Kalimpong, promoting heritage sites, local festivals and plantation tourism serves to project a distinct Gorkha identity, reinforcing demands for greater political recognition. Similarly, in Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri, the focus on eco-tourism in tribal and forest areas helps political leaders showcase their commitment to indigenous welfare and environmental sustainability, creating an image of inclusive governance. The development of infrastructure, promotion of community-based homestays and introduction of iconic projects like Vistadome train are often publicized to build political capital and strengthen voter bases. In Cooch Behar, heritage conservation is used to evoke royal legacies and cultural pride, often leveraged during election campaigns. Thus, tourism acts as a political tool to craft narratives of development, inclusion and regional identity, shaping political images that resonate deeply with local populations.

## 6. Scenario of State Government towards North Bengal

The Himalayan and adjacent districts of North Bengal are Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Alipurduar- from a strategic focus area in West Bengal's tourism policy due to their rich blend of natural beauty, cultural heritage and ecological significance. The government's approach here is multi-pronged, aiming to promote eco-tourism, heritage conservation, adventure tourism and sustainable community-based initiatives.

In Darjeeling and Kalimpong, there has been continuous investment in upgrading tourist lodges, developing satellite destinations like Pedong and Takdah, modernizing the iconic Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (Toy Train) and promoting adventure sports and cultural festivals. These initiatives are

complemented by the preservation of Tea estates under the plantation tourism model, where eco-friendly resorts within tea gardens are encouraged to attract both domestic and international tourists.

Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar are being developed as key nodes for eco-tourism and heritage circuits. The Dooars region in Jalpaiguri, rich in forests and wildlife sanctuaries, is now hub for a jungle safaris, river camps and eco-forests. Cooch Behar's palaces, temples and archaeological sites are receiving preservation support, alongside tourism infrastructure like wayside amenities, conservation centres and improved road networks.

Alipurduar is being developed as a sustainable and community-centric tourism destination with the government activity supporting grassroots homestays, eco-resorts and local guides. This is complemented by enhanced digital outreach like book, websites etc., improved infrastructure and scenic transport options like the vistadome train. Close coordination between district authorities, tourism bodies and forest departments reflect a holistic approach- integrating economic growth, indigenous welfare and ecological presentation.

**6.1 Tourism Infrastructure Development:** The government has consistently focused on improving connectivity and basic infrastructure in North Bengal. Major investments have been made in upgrading Bagdogra Airport into an International Terminal to facilitate tourist arrivals, particularly from Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Road networks connecting Siliguri, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and the Dooars region have also been prioritized under schemes like the North Bengal Development Department (NBDD) projects to ensure smooth transportation, especially during the peak tourism seasons.

**6.2 Promotion of Eco-tourism and Tea-tourism:** The government has strongly promoted eco-tourism and tea-tourism as key attractions in North Bengal policies have encouraged the development of eco-friendly resorts, home stays and forest lodges in regions like Gorumara, Jaldapara and Neora Valley, with an emphasis on sustainability. Tea tourism which offers experiences in historic tea estates and colonial bungalows has been heavily promoted through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) to boost rural employment and attract niche tourists. Special packages and incentives have been introduced to attract private investment in these sectors.

**6.3 Decentralization and Local Participation:** In response to long-standing demands for greater local control, the government has initiated policies to involve local communities in tourism related decision making, particularly in eco-tourism projects. Some schemes allow local cooperatives and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to run homestays, cultural tours and eco guides with the aim of providing direct economic benefits to hill and forest dwelling communities.

**6.4 Peace-Tourism Strategy:** Tourism promotion in North Bengal has also been used as a political strategy to maintain peace tourism and stability. The government has carefully linked tourism development to the broader political settlement with the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) and other hill parties. Investment announcements, roadshows and cultural festivals have been strategically tried to promote peace-building and show visible economic progress in the region, especially after periods of political unrest.

**6.5 Creation of North Bengal Development Department (NBDD):** The formation of the North Bengal Development Department (NBDD) is a significant policy move that focuses exclusively on the holistic development of the North Bengal region. Tourism development is a key pillar of NBDD's agenda. Through this department, the government has sanctioned special funds for the improvement of tourist sites, creation of new trekking routes and beautification of towns like Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Cooch Behar.



**6.6 Cultural and Festival Tourism Promotion:** The state has also introduced policies to promote cultural tourism by supporting local festivals such as the Darjeeling tea and tourism festival, the Kalimpong folk festival and traditional Adivasi fairs in the Dooars. These initiatives aim to attract both national and international tourists while fostering cultural pride among local communities.

Despite these policies, critics argue that state led tourism development in North Bengal is often top-down and Kolkata centric, with insufficient attention to local aspirations. Local leaders and ethnic groups continue to demand greater control over tourism revenues and policy making processes, arguing that the benefits disproportionately flow to outside investors and urban centres. Environmentalists also caution against over commercialization, which could threaten the fragile Himalayan ecosystem.

## 7. Conclusion

Tourism in North Bengal has evolved into a dynamic blend of economic strategy, cultural preservation, regional development and political symbolism. The region's diverse landscape- spanning the Himalayan districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong to the lush forests and tea estates of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar. In the Himalayan belt, the focus on upgrading infrastructure, developing eco-resorts, promoting adventure tourism and reviving the Toy train has strengthened the region's identity as a global mountain destination. Simultaneously, Alipurduar has emerged as a model of community-led eco-tourism, with homestays, guided tours and local empowerment forming the backbone of sustainable development. Across North Bengal, the government's integrated approach includes the promotion of tourism villages, eco-friendly policies, public-private partnerships and heavy investments in publicly to attract both domestic and international tourists. Importantly tourism in north Bengal is not just about economic growth- it also serves as a political tool for image-building, regional assertion and social integration. Political parties, local councils and district administrations actively use tourism development to project themselves as agents of progress, inclusivity and cultural guardianship, particularly in ethnically diverse and politically sensitive regions like Darjeeling and Alipurduar.

Thus, the politics of tourism in North Bengal reveals a complex but deliberate effort to balance economic interests, cultural pride, environmental sustainability and political narratives, making it one of the most strategically developed tourism regions in West Bengal today.

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