

Developing a Comprehensive Plan of Tourism for Malda District, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Malda district is located in the central part of West Bengal. It is the most important link between the north and southern parts of the state and shares an international border with Bangladesh in the east. The district is rich in historical ruins from the Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic reigns. It is the mango capital of the state with vast orchards and three varieties of premium mangoes getting the GI tag. The rich tourist heritage however has not been exploited properly. The monuments are now lying in ruin and suffering from neglect. Necessary infrastructure is lacking and almost no efforts have been made to promote and advertise tourism industry in the district. There is also ample scope of developing ancillary industries like the souvenir industry, mango processing units, local and tribal crafts etc. Though there is ample scope, the district suffers from problems like poor development of accommodation, minimal effort to preserve the architectural heritage, no coherent plan of tourism development, lack of infrastructure like proper guides, shops and facilities at the tourist spots as well as a less than sterling reputation about safety and security. This paper seeks to describe the various tourist resources and identify the problems. Information has been collected mainly from secondary sources like articles, newspaper reports, Government surveys, websites and blogs as well as from personal visit by the author. It also puts forward a comprehensive plan for the development of tourism in Malda.

Keywords: Malda, Tourism, Heritage, Mango, Kirtan

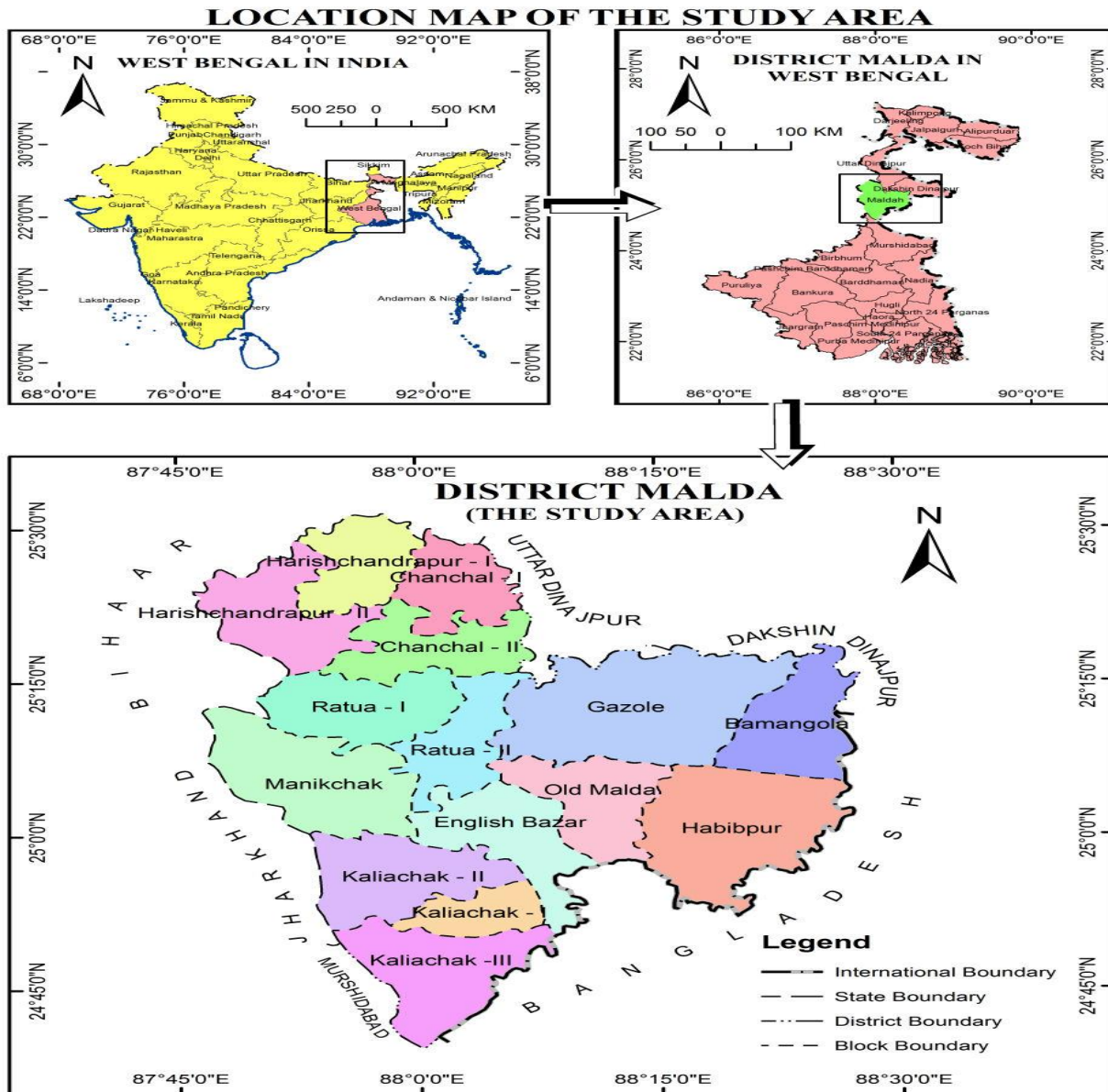
INTRODUCTION

The Eastern state of West Bengal in India is rich in both historical and geographical diversity. It has therefore attracted tourists from India as well as abroad. However, most of the tourists visit the magnificent Himalayas in the North or the unique marshy mangroves of Sunderbans in the south. Recently, the western plateau region of Purulia is attracting tourists, especially during the early spring when the forests there turn red with *Palash* flowers. On the other hand, the central part of the state has largely been ignored by the tourists.

The district of Malda is located almost exactly midway in the state. It lies 347 kms away from Kolkata. It stretches from 24°40'20" N to 25°32'08" N and 87°45'50" E to 88°28'10" E, covering an area of 3733 sq kms. Malda forms a part of the moribund delta region of the Ganga. It is a flat land where agriculture is the main economic activity.

The region is rich in historical and heritage sites. There is also a variety of natural resources which can be innovatively used to promote tourism. However, the real gap is in innovation and organization. Tourism as an economic activity was never given much importance in this district. It has been overshadowed by the mountains of the north, the deltas of the south, the temples of Birbhum and the unique vegetation of the western plateau. As a result, it has lost a golden avenue of revenue generation.

Fig. 1.: Malda District in West Bengal, India



While tourism will never be the main economic activity, it has the potential to provide considerable job opportunities in the district.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

- Describe the various tourist resources of the state of Malda
- Identify the problems of developing tourism in the region.
- Suggest various means to overcome these problems so that tourism becomes a viable alternative.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study has been conducted using secondary sources including government documents and websites, journal articles and travel information. The author has visited all the places and has drawn upon her personal experience. Interviews have been conducted with local people, the *pujaris* of the temples and local shopkeepers to obtain a clear idea.

The historical tourist resources of Malda

Historically, Malda is one of the most important districts of West Bengal. Its ancient name is Gour. According to several scholars, the name comes from the high quality 'Gur' or jaggery that was produced here. The famous king Sashanka had established a powerful Hindu kingdom here at that time. His successors could not hold on to it and Malda came under the rule of the Buddhist monarchs. It was the capital of both the Buddhist Pala and Hindu Sena dynasties. The majesty of Bengal rose to new heights under the rule of these kings. This was followed by the rule of the Sultans and Nawabs. Each dynasty had left their imprint on the culture and heritage of the region (Ray, 1961). Though most of their constructions are now in ruins, they provide invaluable resources for the development of heritage tourism. The Muslim rulers patronized art and construction. So, in addition to the major architecture, several small and medium monuments were put up in the district (Ross, Saxena, Correia & Deutz, 2017). Most of them have fallen into disrepair, but timely intervention can preserve these invaluable resources.

All the monuments have now been taken over by the Archaeological Survey of India. Some of the most important archaeological sites and monuments are as follows:

- The **Adina Mosque** is the largest in India. It was built in 1373. Though most of the huge structure lies in ruins, it is still possible to distinguish elements of Arab, Persian and Byzantine influence.
- The **Dakhil Darwaza** or **Salami Darwaza**, build in 1425, stands as the point from where canons were fired to honour someone. It still remains a beautiful example of terracotta architecture.
- The **Qadam Rasul Mosque** was built in 1530 and houses a stone tablet with the footprint of the prophet.
- The **Baraduari Masjid** was built in 1526. At one time, it had 44 domes with gilded tops. Much of the structure lie in ruins.
- The **Lukochuri Darwaza** (1655) is another doorway.
- The **Chamkan** or **Chika Mosque** (1475) is archeologically significant because of its similarity with Hindu temple, arched roof and octagonal pillars
- The **Firoza Minar** is Bengal's answer to the Qutb Minar. This 25.6 meter high pillar is a victory pillar and has intricate carvings.
- The **Eklakhi Mausoleum** is another beautiful monument here
- The **Lotan Masjid** (1476) was covered with colored enamel tiles. Most of them have been destroyed, but the interior is better preserved. It remains one of the most beautiful monuments of Gour.
- The remains of the massive **Baisgazi wall** is truly marvellous to behold. This was probably a wall constructed to protect the inner sanctum of the palace. Only a small portion remain now, but it is no less majestic.
- Next to this huge wall lies **Ballal Bati**. This vast mound was excavated only in 2003. Opinions vary widely about its nature and purpose. It is definitely much older than the Islamic structure. Some identify it as the place of the Sena king Ballal Sena while others think it is the ruins of an ancient Buddhist monastery. Mysterious circular pits with holes can be seen.

All these monuments are located very near to each other. They are a proud reflection of the heritage of Bengal.

Fig 2: Eklakhi Mausoleum



Fig 3: Adina Mosque (Interior)



Fig 4: Baroduari or Baro Shona Masjid



Fig.5: Ballal Bati



The religious tourist resources of Malda

When it comes to religious tourist spots, the neighbouring district of Birbhum largely overshadows Malda, but it still has a few unique spots which attract a large number of people.

- **Johura Kali temple** is the best known Hindu temple of the district. It is devoted to Goddess Kali. At one time it was a small structure where a stone was worshipped as the deity. However, as it has become more and more popular, the temple has been renovated. The idol has been restored and the temple premises have been expanded. A huge fair occurs here from middle of April to mid May. Recently, the area around the temple has been cleaned in order to hold the fair. This temple is best known for curing diseases which attracts devotees all year round.
- **Ramkeli** is probably the most famous religious spot of Malda. It is located in the small village of the same name. It is said that Sri Chaitanya – the great Vaishnava saint of medieval Bengal, visited this spot while travelling to Puri. One of his famous disciples was Sanatan Goswami, who built the original temple and preserved the footprint of the great saint here. Since then, Ramkeli has gained special significance for the Vaishnav community. In recent years, the temple has been fully renovated. The most unique feature is the huge fair held around this temple in the Bengali month of Jaishtha. It is one of the largest congregations of Vaishnavas in Bengal. The greatest attraction of the fair is the traditional Vaishnav devotional songs or Kirtan which is held here non stop for several days. Kirtan is sung in a specific way by a group of people – each using different specific instruments. It is one of the indigenous and gradually disappearing cultural heritage of Bengal. During the Ramkeli fair, Kirtan artists from all over the state come here to perform and exchange ideas. Hence, this fair plays a very important role in preserving an intangible cultural heritage of Bengal.

- In addition to the above spots, there are two other lesser known religious spots in Malda. These are two **Shiva temples**, one located in **Gobindapur** near the Johura temple and the other at **Malopara**. The terracotta art on these temples attract the true enthusiasts.

Fig. 6: The renovated temple at Ramkeli



The cultural tourist resources of Malda

Two most important cultural tourist resources of Malda are as follows:

- The **Ramkeli Kirtan** is an intangible cultural resource. Kirtan is a special type of devotional song of the Vaishnavas performed by a group of at least four people. Instruments like Mridang, Khol, Sanai are used. It is a chant type music. It either relates stories of Radha and Krishna or the great saint Sri Chaitanya. The vocalist often chant the name of the deity repeatedly. Kirtan was extremely popular at one time, but it is slowly disappearing. The month long fair at Ramkeli plays a vital role in preserving this heritage.
- The **Malda Museum** is small but well maintained with a surprisingly rich collection. Since the district has been the capital of several dynasties, relicts and artifacts are often found here during normal digging. Several pieces has been donated by local people who often had the relicts in their family for generations. The displays are well kept, but unfortunately there are no guides to explain the significance of the pieces.
- There are two very important intangible cultural resources in Malda. These are the **Gambhira mask** and the **Nakshi Kantha**. Gambhira masks are traditional tribal masks used to perform a satirical theatre called Gambhira dance to drive out evil forces and please the gods. They were generally made of wood of neem or fig trees and are hand painted, but nowadays clay and tin are also used. It is a skilful process. The Craft Council of West Bengal sell the small masks as souvenirs. The Nakshi kantha are embroidered hand made quilts produced by village women. It is an intricate art and is on the verge of disappearing.

Fig.7: Some samples from the Malda Museum



The natural tourist resources of Malda

- Malda is known as the **Mango capital** of Bengal. At present, three varieties of mangoes of Malda has obtained the GI tag from the government of India. These are the Fazli mango, Himsagar mango and Lakshmanbhog mango (Das, 2023). The Fazli mangoes are probably the most common. These are large sweet fruits which grow in large numbers. The best quality is the Himsagar which is almost fibreless and very sweet. The Lakshmanbhog is a beautiful golden coloured mango. Siddiqui (2015) and others conducted a detailed study of mango cultivation and mango based economy of Malda. He pointed out that while there are about 1100 mango varieties, 250 varieties are cultivated commercially in Malda. The area under mango orchards have expanded from 21.68 thousand hectares in 1990-91 to 27.40 thousand hectares in 2010- 11 (Siddiqui, 2015, District Horticultural Office). These orchards can be a major tourist resource if proper infrastructure is made available. Mango tourism has already gained recognition, with the mango fair being the major attraction. Apart from that, mango itself is a major attraction. The Malda Research Station of the Central Institute for Subtropical Horticulture, Lucknow organized an exhibition of 250 rare varieties (ETV Bharat, 2015). While the primary aim was to encourage the stakeholders of the mango economy, its attraction for the tourists is undeniable. The mango products like dried mango pulp, mango jelly, jam, chutney and pickles are some of the most important souvenirs that tourists can buy in Malda (Das, 2017).
- Silk products** are another important tourist resource of the district. Malda is known for sericulture and production of various qualities of silk like *garad*, *matka* and *tussar*. These are used to weave different products and also sold to other districts (Das, 2017). This economy provides a scope for developing silk tourism in the district.

The problems of tourism industry of Malda

Hoque (2024) had analysed the status of tourism industry in Malda. A clearer picture emerges from a survey conducted by Datamation Consultants Pvt. Ltd. under the direction of the Ministry of Tourism, between April 2014 to March 2015. An analysis of this table reveal that Malda receives a very small share of both domestic

and foreign tourists out of the total tourists visiting the state. The percentage of domestic overnight tourists as well as day visitors range from 1% to 4% while that of foreign tourists range from 0.1% to 0.3%. The data clearly reveal that tourism is not at all developed in the state.

Table 1: Number of tourists visiting Malda

Month	No. of domestic overnight tourists	No. of same day visitors (domestic)	Percentage of domestic overnight tourists visiting West Bengal	Percentage of same day visitors in West Bengal	No. of foreign tourists	Percentage of foreign tourists visiting West Bengal
2014						
April	86009	13792	3.4%	3.4%	266	0.2%
May	101230	14418	4%	4.1%	339	0.3%
June	80211	10727	3.8%	3.8%	303	0.3%
July	98867	26576	2.9%	3.2%	248	0.3%
Aug	134615	24588	3.3%	3.3%	229	0.2%
Sept	116662	19823	2.4%	2.3%	262	0.2%
Oct	83395	18465	1.4%	1.8%	292	0.2%
Nov	59333	18299	1.3%	1.9%	225	0.1%
Dec	126708	17816	2%	1.9%	246	0.1%
2015						
Jan	102935	10533	1.4%	1.4%	284	0.2%
Feb	104392	15336	1.9%	1.8%	262	0.2%
Mar	76660	14517	1.6%	1.6%	266	0.2%

Source: Annual Final Report of Tourism Survey for the State of West Bengal (April 2014-March 2015), Ministry of Tourism

The question arises, why, in spite of having a vast number of archeological sites and being the foremost mango producing region of not only West Bengal, but also India, tourism has remained in such an abysmally poor state. One of the important objectives of this paper is to identify the lacuna of the tourism industry in Malda. This author has explored all the tourist spots of Malda. This, along with the current literature reveal that the main factors leading to poor (or almost non existent) tourism development in the district are as follows:

- The location of the district of Malda is rather unfortunate as far as the development of tourism is concerned. It is located too far away from the capital city of Kolkata for the tourists to undertake a weekend visit or a day out. Kolkata receives the highest number of tourists in the state because it is the gateway and well connected with the rest of the country. It is convenient to enjoy a weekend visit to the Sunderbans in the south or to Santiniketan in the north. Malda, on the other hand, is at an inconvenient distance. The second most popular tourist region of the state is North Bengal – especially the mountains

of the Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts. Here again, Malda is too far to be included in a circuit of the north. As a result, it has been consistently overlooked.

- Malda, or Gour has been the seat of three major eras of power. It has innumerable archeological sites under the supervision of the Archeological Society of India (ASI). But the sites are neither well maintained, nor well preserved. During the personal survey of the spots conducted by this author (September, 2025) most of the sites were closed to the tourists. There were gardens surrounding the site and iron fencing kept the visitors out. Local shopkeepers reported that the ASI does not allow anybody to approach the monuments. On the other extreme are some other monuments like the Baisgazi wall and Ballal Bati which have been left completely unprotected. In fact, when one looks at the majestic wall, it can be easily detected that the durable bricks are being taken away from it. It is most unfortunate that ASI has not deemed it necessary to put up even an information board. In a few places where worn down boards are seen, the writing has been almost completely washed away. The complete indifference of the ASI is inexplicable and the district is paying for it.
- The small Malda Museum has a beautiful collection, but it completely ignores the heritage of the district. There should have been sections of display on Gambhira masks, samples of the nakshi kantha, dioramas of kirtan and a completely separate division on the mangoes of the region. The names of the mangoes are truly special and often they have interesting histories. However, that is not showcased in the museum. It must also be said that either an actual or a virtual guide is a pressing necessity in the museum. The relicts arouse questions and interests, but there is no way to satisfy them.
- Accommodation facilities are not well developed in the district. In the survey conducted by the Ministry of Tourism between April 2014 and March 2015, it was revealed that the Occupancy rate in Malda varied between 30 and 35, which is very low. Recently, the Tourism Department of the Government of West Bengal has renovated and reinaugurated the tourist lodge named Amrapali. It is very conveniently located, is clean and offers standard Bengali cuisine. However, it does not offer any ancillary tourist services like booking a car or a trip of the tourist spots. This creates a gateway for touts who often overcharge the tourists. There are almost no other safe, family friendly accommodation facility in Malda Town.
- The question of safety and security is another stumbling block to the development of tourism in Malda. This district borders Bangladesh on the East. It has gained a rather unsavoury reputation regarding smuggling and other anti social activities. While the truth of the allegations are far from being proven, a negative word of mouth publicity has definitely discouraged the growth of tourism.
- Finally, the apathy of the government and lack of awareness among the local people are two very important factors. West Bengal is rich in tourist resources that are already famous, like the Darjeeling mountains, the mangrove forest of the south and the historical and culturally rich city of Kolkata. The potential of Malda has never been explored because it has been easier to promote tourism in those places which are already famous. The local people have neither the skill, nor the knowledge to develop tourism. They need to be made aware how much tourism can contribute to community enrichment and economic development so that they take an active interest in it.

Suggestions to develop tourism in Malda

Considering the richness and the diversity of tourist resources in the district, it would indeed be a wasted opportunity if this activity is not properly developed and explored. A tourism circuit can be developed in this district keeping the following suggestions in mind:

- Since Malda falls almost half way between Kolkata in the South and Darjeeling in the north, it has good connectivity by train and road. The only problem is that because of the chicken neck situation, a huge number of lorries and trucks ply on the road here, creating traffic jams. It is necessary to construct more by-passes and completely separate the routes of passenger and goods vehicles. This will improve the accessibility of the district.

- Accommodation facilities are seriously lacking in the district. It is necessary to increase the bed capacity. The government tourist lodge has recently been renovated. In addition, several other family friendly lodges need to come up. A public-private-partnership model can be a viable alternative for developing accommodation infrastructure in the district.
- The Department of Tourism need to act in collaboration with the Archeological Society of India to preserve the monuments, allow visitors and put up proper information boards. Local government bodies should be involved in the program. Some monuments like the Firoza Minar is kept completely closed due to security reasons while others like the Baisgazi wall or Ballal Bati is left at the mercy of nature and local people. No efforts were seen to preserve the remnants of the colorful enamel work of some of the monuments. There should be proper approach roads. Information about time of visit should be easily available. The information boards should be put up at each monument. One important step can be the beginning of a light and sound show which will definitely be very popular and will be a huge tourist attraction.
- The Malda Museum has vast scope of development. Information plaques and boards should be set up. Separate sections should be devoted to the heritage of the district like Kirtan, Gambhira, Nakshi Kantha, mangoes, silk etc. In addition, the museum is one of the best places to set up a souvenir / gift shop. Das (2017) mentions the various products which can be sold as souvenirs like photos, paintings, sketches and models of the architectural monuments of the districts, handicraft products like Gambhira masks and tribal musical instruments and mango products. Inspiration can be drawn from the huge gift shop doing brisk business within the premises of the famous Mysore Palace where products like sandal based cosmetics, incense, handicrafts and even dresses are sold. A tie-up can be organized with local cooperatives or business organization. The Museum must also provide facilities like washrooms and a small eatery.
- The various monuments of Gour are distributed over a large area. The government must set up some facilities of toilet, drinking water, information booth and first aid in order to help the tourists.
- One of the greatest lacuna of the tourism industry of Malda is lack of trained guides and tourist cars. The district is rich in heritage and history, but it requires the services of a guide to bring them alive for the tourists. It is best if the government, in collaboration with the ASI can enter into agreements with local tour organizations who will provide trained drivers and guides for the tourists. The rates for the guides should be fixed by the government as has been done in the neighbouring district of Murshidabad.
- There is huge scope of developing mango tourism in Malda. Mango trees are big trees and they grow in dense orchards. Small nature based lodges can be set up where the tourists can spend the night amidst the mango orchards. The lodges can sell mango products and serve mango based dishes. They can arrange visits to food processing units where tourists get to see how mango products like chutneys, pickles and mango jelly are being prepared. Just like a trip to North Bengal invariably includes a visit to a tea factory, a tour of Malda should include a visit to a mango processing plant.
- A single handicraft has led to the growth of whole villages in several parts of India. A similar handicraft village may be developed in Malda where tourists can see how the Gambhira masks are being made, the Nakshi kantha being sewn and the silk textile being woven. Souvenir shops in such a handicraft village can do brisk business. It will not only serve as a tourist attraction, but also provide economic motivation to preserve these indigenous arts.
- Since Ramkeli hosts one of the biggest fairs of Bengal, a small museum devoted to Vaishnava culture and traditions and Kirtan can be set up here. The government is already constructing guest houses to accommodate the huge number of devotees. The temple has been thoroughly renovated. Kirtan is rapidly becoming one of the vanishing arts of Bengal. A museum can be set up here showcasing the kirtan instruments and dioramas of kirtan gatherings. A gift shop can sell DVDs of Kirtan.

- Finally, proper publicity and advertisement is indispensable if tourism is to develop in Malda district. The fairs of Ramkeli and Johura Kali should receive much greater publicity. Attractive offers advertised over mass media is also needed. The district has to get rid of its unsavoury reputation regarding safety. With proper government patronage, Malda has the potential of emerging as a major tourist centre in West Bengal, attracting a much greater share of the tourists.

CONCLUSION

The huge number of historical and cultural tourist resources of Malda has created an ideal condition for the growth of tourism industry. Moreover, tourism is already well developed in its neighbouring district of Murshidabad. It was the capital of the Nawabs of Bengal and played an important role in the establishment of the British empire in India. If a complete tourist circuit is planned, including both Malda and Murshidabad, this central part of Bengal can get a real economic boost. A proactive government and a conscious public can explore this economic opportunity to lead to the development of agri-tourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism etc and also preserve the unique heritage of the district.

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