

Coastal Tourism Development in Digha: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Digha has developed into one of the most important coastal tourism destinations in eastern India. Its growth has been supported by beach-circuit planning, public infrastructure, tourism accommodation, and institutional interventions by the Digha Sankarpur Development Authority (DSDA). Secondary evidence shows a strong rise in West Bengal's overall tourist visits in 2023, which indicates a wider tourism market that benefits destinations like Digha. At the same time, Digha's development is constrained by serious ecological and management problems such as shoreline erosion, dune degradation, congestion, waste generation, sewage stress, and pressure from unplanned construction. Academic studies on the Digha coast consistently show that tourism has generated employment, business opportunities, and local livelihood diversification, but these gains are accompanied by environmental degradation and growing vulnerability to storms and coastal change. Government interventions such as the Swadesh Darshan beach circuit, drainage and sewerage works, hawker rehabilitation, cyclone shelters, and beautification projects demonstrate that Digha's tourism development is increasingly tied to sustainability and resilience. The study concludes that Digha's future depends on balancing economic expansion with coastal ecosystem protection, community participation, and regulated tourism planning.

Index Terms - Coastal Tourism; Digha; Sustainable Tourism; Coastal Erosion; Tourism Infrastructure; Community Participation; West Bengal.

1. Introduction

Digha is a major seaside destination on the Medinipur coast of West Bengal. Scholarly work describes the Digha coastal sector as a 5.35-km stretch between the Jatranala inlet and Shankarpur estuary and identifies Digha township as the only sea-board urban area of West Bengal as well as one of the major tourist destinations of eastern India. This geographical setting has made Digha attractive for mass beach tourism, weekend travel, and associated service-sector growth.

The institutional basis of coastal tourism development in the region has also expanded over time. DSDA states that the original authority area was enlarged first to include Sankarpur and later Mandarmoni and Tajpur, creating a planning area of 17,220.04 acres aimed at orderly coastal tourism development. At the

national level, the Ministry of Tourism reported that the “Development of Beach Circuit: Udaipur–Digha–Shankarpur–Tajpur–Mandarmani–Fraserganj–Bakkhali–Henry Island” project was sanctioned under Swadesh Darshan for ₹67.99 crore and is physically complete.

However, tourism growth in Digha has not been free from contradictions. Research on the area repeatedly points to coastal erosion, loss of dune vegetation, congestion, sewage, garbage, and construction pressure as major concerns. A recent study also notes that since the 1990s, growth in hotels, roads, and informal commercial activity has intensified ecological stress along the coast.

Thus, Digha represents a classic case of coastal tourism development where economic potential and environmental fragility coexist. Any meaningful study of Digha must therefore examine both the opportunities created by tourism and the challenges threatening long-term sustainability.

2. Review of Literature

Ganguly and Sharma (2015) studied sustainable coastal tourism development in Digha from the perspective of local residents. Their study found that tourism creates economic opportunities, but sustainable development is only possible when local people participate in planning, decision-making, and benefit-sharing.

Jha, Mishra, Deepanshu, Bhatnagar, Ganguly, and Bagri (2014) examined the attitude of coastal residents in the Digha–Shankarpur belt. They emphasized that coastal tourism promotion must be community-based and that residents’ support is a crucial precondition for sustainable tourism growth in beach destinations.

Duari (2018) analyzed the impact of coastal tourism on the local community in the Digha–Shankarpur coastal area. The study reported that tourism affects the social, cultural, political, and economic life of residents and also pointed out problems such as erosion, congestion, sewage, garbage, poor accommodation quality, and limited hospitality skills.

Roy (2020) focused on environmental issues and sustainability in Digha’s coastal tourism sector. Using SWOT analysis, the study showed that unplanned mass tourism has generated ecological stress and argued that eco-tourism practices and public awareness are essential for long-term sustainability.

Patra, Bhattacharya, Mishra, Saren, and Halder (2021) examined tourism and environmental concerns in Old Digha. Their work highlighted that although tourism has strengthened the local economy and social life, it has also intensified environmental degradation, making sustainability-oriented management necessary.

Roy and Pagaldiviti (2023) studied responsible beach tourism and environmental issues in Digha. They concluded that unplanned tourism has caused pollution, drainage problems, and stress on the shoreline, and they recommended stronger government action and local awareness to support sustainable eco-tourism.

Mondal and Sen (2017/2020) worked on predictive analysis of tourist inflow in the beaches of West Bengal with special reference to Digha–Mandarmoni. Their study demonstrated that tourist arrivals in these beach destinations have clear trend and seasonal components, which is important for tourism planning, infrastructure management, and forecasting demand.

Bandyopadhyay, Mukherjee, and Pahari (2009) made a major contribution by studying coastal erosion and its management at Digha. They found that the Digha coast has been eroding for decades and argued that shoreline instability poses a direct threat to the tourism economy and to the long-term safety of the resort area.

Acharya, Pathak, Mondal, Dash, and Bhadra (2021) assessed the economic impact of tourism and the ecotourism potential of the coastal belt of Purba Medinipur, including major destinations such as Digha, New Digha, Mandarmoni, Shankarpur, and Tajpur. Their study suggested that tourism contributes significantly to regional economic development, but violations of coastal norms and ecological stress can weaken its sustainability.

Baitalik and Majumdar (2015; 2018) discussed coastal tourism destinations in West Bengal and later analyzed the performance and seasonality of coastal tourism, including the Digha–Shankarpur–Mandarmoni belt. Their work showed that Digha is historically important as a coastal tourism destination and that tourist flow is highly seasonal, requiring better planning of services, facilities, and destination management.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the present status of coastal tourism development in Digha.
2. To identify the major opportunities created by tourism growth in Digha.
3. To analyze the environmental, infrastructural, and social challenges affecting Digha’s coastal tourism.
4. To interpret secondary data related to tourism growth, coastal management, and local development.
5. To suggest measures for sustainable coastal tourism development in Digha.

4. Data analysis and Major Findings

1) Tourism Growth Context

Tourism Growth Context in Digha

Because the Ministry of Tourism does not maintain district-wise tourist-arrival data, the present tourism-growth context of Digha has to be examined through West Bengal’s state-level tourism statistics and Digha’s inclusion in official coastal-tourism development schemes. This is methodologically important: Digha is one of the state’s leading coastal destinations, but its exact annual footfall is not published separately in the cited ministry reply.

Table 1: West Bengal Tourist Visits, 2022–2023

Category	2022	2023 (P)	Absolute Increase	% Growth
Domestic Tourist Visits	8,45,42,195	14,56,69,292	6,11,27,097	72.3%
Foreign Tourist Visits	10,37,017	27,06,942	16,69,925	161.0%

Source: Compiled by the researcher from Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2226, answered on 05.08.2024.

Table 2: Growth Index of Domestic and Foreign Tourist Visits

Category	2022 Index	2023 Index
Domestic Tourist Visits	100	172.3
Foreign Tourist Visits	100	261.0

Source: Calculated from Ministry of Tourism data

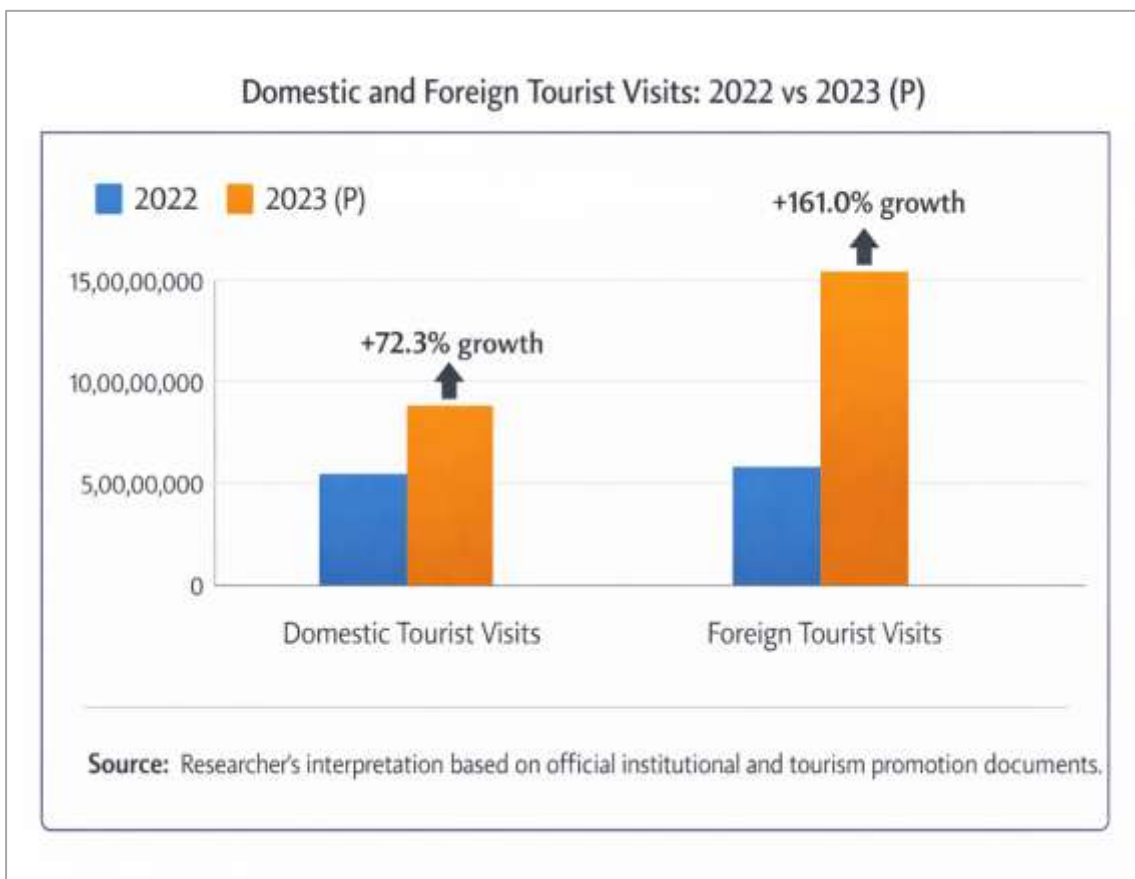


Figure 1: Growth Index (2022 = 100)

The data clearly show that West Bengal experienced very strong tourism growth between 2022 and 2023. Domestic tourist visits increased from 8.45 crore to 14.56 crore, while foreign tourist visits rose from 10.37 lakh to 27.07 lakh. In percentage terms, domestic tourism grew by about 72.3%, whereas foreign tourism expanded by about 161.0%. This suggests not merely recovery, but a substantial expansion of tourism demand in the state during 2023. Since Digha is one of West Bengal's most recognized beach destinations, this broader growth environment strongly indicates a favorable demand context for its coastal tourism sector.

From a tourism-development perspective, the data point to two important trends. First, the rise in domestic tourist movement is especially relevant for Digha because the destination has historically depended heavily on short-stay and medium-stay domestic visitors from West Bengal and nearby states. A 72.3% increase in domestic visits at the state level implies a much larger potential customer base for beach tourism, hotels, restaurants, transport services, local vendors, and recreational

businesses in Digha. Second, the sharp increase in foreign tourist visits shows that West Bengal's tourism profile became more internationally visible in 2023, which could indirectly improve the branding and attractiveness of established destinations within the state.

However, this interpretation should be made with caution. The ministry has explicitly stated that district-wise tourist-arrival data are not maintained, so one cannot claim an exact numerical growth rate for Digha itself from this source alone. Therefore, the figures should be treated as a growth context, not as direct evidence of destination-specific tourist volume in Digha.

Even so, Digha's current relevance is reinforced by the fact that it is part of the officially sanctioned "Development of Beach Circuit: Udaipur–Digha–Shankarpur–Tajpur–Mandarmani–Fraserganj–Bakkhali–Henry Island" project under the Swadesh Darshan scheme, sanctioned for ₹67.99 crore and reported as physically complete. This means that Digha is not only benefiting from a growing tourism market, but is also embedded in a larger state-supported coastal circuit. Overall, the present tourism-growth context of Digha may therefore be described as high-potential, policy-supported, and expansion-oriented, though still limited by the absence of officially published destination-specific arrival statistics.

2) Circuit-Based Development

Circuit-Based Development in Digha

Digha's present development pattern is best understood through the Beach Circuit approach rather than as a stand-alone beach town. The Ministry of Tourism states that under the Swadesh Darshan scheme it sanctioned the project "Development of Beach Circuit: Udaipur–Digha–Shankarpur–Tajpur–Mandarmani–Fraserganj–Bakkhali–Henry Island" in West Bengal in 2015–16 for ₹67.99 crore, and the project is reported as physically complete. An official ministry reply also notes that ₹65.07 crore was released and utilized by the implementing agency.

Table 3: Official Profile of the Digha Beach Circuit project

Item	Details
Scheme	Swadesh Darshan
Theme	Coastal Circuit
State	West Bengal
Project name	Development of Beach Circuit: Udaipur–Digha–Shankarpur–Tajpur–Mandarmani–Fraserganj–Bakkhali–Henry Island
Year of sanction	2015–16
Sanctioned cost	₹67.99 crore
Amount released/utilized	₹65.07 crore
Status	Physically complete
Implementing agency	West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation Ltd.

Source: Compiled by the researcher from Ministry of Tourism, Government of India official replies and project records.

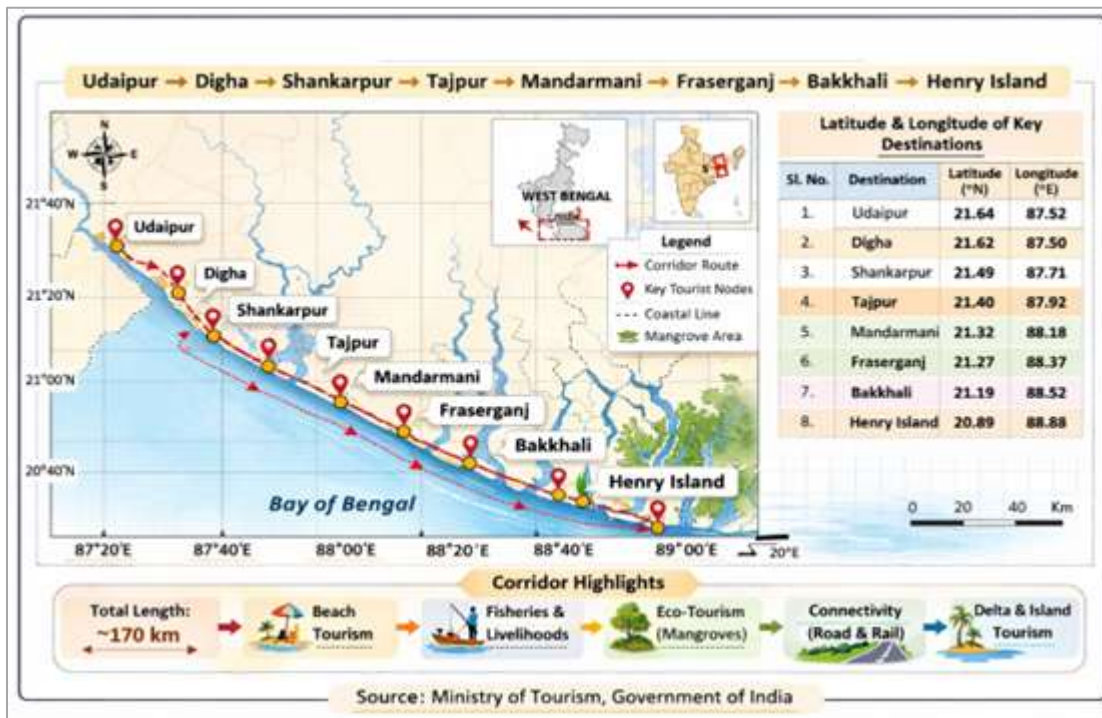


Fig 2: Structure of the coastal Tourism Corridor

Table 4: Development Implications of The Circuit Model

Development Dimension	Likely Implication for Digha
Spatial integration	Digha becomes one node in a wider coastal corridor
Tourist movement	Encourages multi-stop travel instead of single-destination visitation
Length of stay	May increase average stay as tourists combine nearby beaches
Product diversification	Supports leisure, excursion, eco-tourism, and route-based tourism
Pressure management	Can potentially reduce over-concentration on one beachfront
Regional benefit spread	Tourism gains can extend to nearby coastal settlements

Source: Researcher’s interpretation based on the official circuit structure and the Ministry’s destination-centric sustainable tourism approach.

The circuit-based development model marks an important shift in the tourism geography of Digha. Earlier, Digha was commonly viewed as a single, self-contained seaside resort. The official Beach Circuit project shows that the policy approach has changed: Digha is now embedded in a linked chain of coastal destinations stretching from Udaipur to Henry Island. This is significant because a circuit creates a regional tourism system rather than a single-point attraction. In planning terms, this means Digha is being positioned as one strategic node within a broader coastal network of beaches and associated tourism infrastructure.

This corridor logic creates several development opportunities. First, it can support route diversification. Tourists are no longer limited to staying only in Digha; they may travel across adjacent beach destinations within the same coastal belt. Second, it can promote multi-destination travel, which is important for regional tourism expansion because visitors may combine recreation,

sightseeing, short excursions, and different beach experiences in one trip. Third, the circuit model can potentially lead to longer tourist stays, since a chain of destinations generally offers more variety than a single beach town. These implications are not stated as numerical outcomes in the ministry documents, but they are reasonable inferences from the officially sanctioned corridor structure and the broader destination-centric logic of tourism-circuit development.

Another major implication is de-concentration. Digha has historically experienced crowding and environmental pressure during peak periods. A circuit-based model can, at least in principle, distribute visitors across multiple coastal nodes rather than concentrating all tourism demand on one beachfront. This may reduce stress on Digha's core beach area while simultaneously extending tourism benefits to nearby places such as Shankarpur, Tajpur, and Mandarmani. In this sense, the Beach Circuit is not only an infrastructure project but also a regional planning mechanism.

Overall, the present status of circuit-based development suggests that Digha is now part of an integrated coastal tourism corridor with completed central support and a stronger regional planning role. Therefore, Digha's future tourism growth is likely to depend not only on its own beach appeal, but also on how effectively it functions within this wider coastal circuit.

3) Infrastructure and Resilience in Digha

The present phase of tourism development in Digha is increasingly linked with basic infrastructure, environmental services, and disaster resilience. Under the Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) project for the West Bengal project area covering Digha to Shankarpur and Sagar Island, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change reports the following achievements: 95 ha of mangrove plantation, 24 multipurpose cyclone shelters, 20 km storm-water drainage at Digha, 6.7 MLD STP and sewerage networking at Digha, beach beautification and rehabilitation of approximately 1,300 hawkers, and direct livelihood benefits to over 41,000 individuals, of whom nearly 29,000 are women.

Table 5: ICZM-Related Infrastructure and Resilience Achievements Relevant to Digha

Component	Achievement
Mangrove plantation	95 hectares
Cyclone shelters	24
Storm-water drainage at Digha	20 km
STP and sewerage networking at Digha	6.7 MLD
Hawker rehabilitation at Digha	Approx. 1,300 persons
Direct livelihood beneficiaries	Over 41,000 individuals
Women beneficiaries	Nearly 29,000

Source: Compiled by the researcher from Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Annual Report 2019–20.



Fig 3: Functional Dimensions of Resilience-Oriented Tourism Development

These indicators show that Digha's tourism development is no longer confined to hotels, roads, and beach promotion alone. The addition of storm-water drainage and sewerage treatment infrastructure is especially important because sanitation and wastewater management are critical in high-footfall coastal destinations. In tourism geography, poor drainage and inadequate sewage systems directly affect beach quality, public health, and visitor satisfaction. Therefore, the creation of 20 km drainage and 6.7 MLD STP/sewerage networking suggests a structural attempt to support tourism through urban environmental management.

The resilience dimension is equally significant. Digha is a storm-prone coastal destination, so the construction of 24 cyclone shelters and the planting of 95 hectares of mangroves indicate that tourism development is being linked with climate adaptation and coastal protection. Mangroves have ecological value, while cyclone shelters strengthen human safety during coastal hazards. This means that tourism planning in Digha is increasingly being integrated with risk reduction rather than treated as a purely commercial activity.

A third major aspect is livelihood integration. The rehabilitation of approximately 1,300 hawkers and the direct benefit reaching over 41,000 people, including nearly 29,000 women, suggests that tourism infrastructure is also being used to formalize or stabilize local economic participation. This is important because coastal tourism often depends on informal workers, petty traders, and service providers. In this context, Digha's development appears to incorporate social inclusion alongside physical improvement.

Overall, the present status of infrastructure and resilience in Digha can be described as service-based, safety-oriented, and livelihood-sensitive. The available evidence indicates that tourism development in Digha is increasingly tied to sanitation, resilience, disaster preparedness, and community benefit rather than only to beautification or accommodation growth.

4) Institutional Expansion and Diversification

Digha’s tourism development has also expanded at the institutional and product level. The Digha Sankarpur Development Authority (DSDA) states that its jurisdiction was enlarged to include Sankarpur and later Mandarmoni and Tajpur, creating a 17,220.04-acre planning area for the development of coastal tourism and orderly development. DSDA further states that it has continued to add tourism infrastructure, strengthen existing infrastructure, improve road connectivity, and pursue sustainable development, eco-friendly tourism, and support for local businesses.

At the same time, West Bengal Tourism’s MICE brochure identifies Digha as a MICE destination, noting that it offers the Dighashree Bangla International Convention Centre and more than 5+ star category hotels. The brochure presents Digha not only as a leisure beach destination but also as a venue for meetings and conferences with a coastal backdrop.

Table 6: Indicators of Institutional Expansion and Diversification in Digha

Indicator	Evidence
Institutional planning expansion	DSDA planning area expanded to 17,220.04 acres
Functional role of DSDA	Tourism infrastructure, road connectivity, infrastructure strengthening
Development approach	Sustainable development, eco-friendly tourism, local business support
Diversified tourism product	Dighashree Bangla International Convention Centre
Hospitality support base	More than 5+ star category hotels
Emerging market segment	MICE tourism alongside leisure tourism

Source: Compiled by the researcher from DSDA official website and West Bengal Tourism MICE brochure.



Figure 4: Diversification Pathway of Tourism in Digha

Traditional beach tourism → planned coastal tourism region → eco-friendly and business-supportive development → conference/event tourism (MICE)

Source: Researcher's interpretation based on official institutional and tourism promotion documents.

The evidence suggests that Digha has moved beyond the status of a simple sea-beach resort and is now being managed as part of a larger coastal planning region. DSDA's expanded jurisdiction and its stated priorities show that tourism development is being coordinated through an institutional framework rather than through scattered local growth. This is important because coastal tourism destinations require land-use regulation, connectivity planning, infrastructure support, and ecological oversight, all of which are easier to pursue through a regional authority.

The second important trend is diversification of tourism products. The presence of the Dighashree Bangla International Convention Centre indicates that Digha is entering the domain of MICE tourism—meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions. This represents a strategic shift from purely leisure-oriented seasonal tourism to a more diversified model that can attract institutional visitors, business events, and organized gatherings. The mention of more than 5+ star category hotels further supports the idea that Digha is developing hospitality capacity for a broader visitor base.

This diversification has practical implications. Conference and event tourism can help extend tourist stays, increase off-season use, and create higher-value demand for accommodation, transport, catering, and event services. At the same time, DSDA's emphasis on eco-friendly tourism and local business support indicates that institutional expansion is being framed not only in growth terms, but also in sustainability terms. That said, this interpretation should remain careful: the official documents establish the infrastructure and policy direction, but they do not by themselves quantify how much MICE tourism has already materialized in Digha.

Overall, the present status of institutional expansion and diversification in Digha may be described as regionally planned, administratively broadened, and functionally diversified, with tourism now extending from beach recreation to convention-based and eco-sensitive development.

5) Environmental Pressure and Carrying-Capacity Stress

Against these opportunities, the environmental stress is substantial. Erosion research shows long-term shoreline loss and increased vulnerability from earlier hard-engineering responses. Field-based and survey-based studies also point to dune degradation, vegetation loss, congestion, sewage, garbage, and pressure from tourism-related construction. Even recent news about transport regulation before festival periods and scaled-back New Year celebrations due to crowd and safety concerns signals that Digha faces peak-load stress beyond ordinary destination management problems.

Major Findings

1. Digha has strong development potential as a coastal tourism hub. Its location, recognition as a major eastern Indian seaside destination, and inclusion in a larger beach circuit strengthen its tourism importance.

2. Tourism has expanded beyond simple beach recreation. The presence of convention infrastructure, road improvements, sanitation works, and organized planning indicates gradual diversification into event tourism and integrated destination development.
3. Tourism generates meaningful livelihood benefits. Studies of local residents show direct and indirect involvement in tourism and suggest that tourism contributes to income, business for local entrepreneurs, and wider local economic activity.
4. Environmental degradation is the central challenge. The Digha coast faces chronic erosion, beach lowering, dune disturbance, vegetation loss, and pollution pressures, all of which threaten the sustainability of coastal tourism.
5. Infrastructure alone is not sufficient. Although drainage, sewerage, shelters, beautification, and hawker rehabilitation are important, unmanaged crowding and tourism pressure continue to create stress on the coast.
6. Community participation is essential. The literature clearly shows that resident cooperation, local skill development, and stakeholder coordination are necessary for sustainable coastal tourism in Digha.

5. Conclusion

Digha presents a strong case of both promise and pressure in coastal tourism development. On one side, it benefits from expanding tourist demand, public investment, planning support, improved sanitation and resilience infrastructure, and wider circuit-based connectivity. On the other side, the destination continues to struggle with erosion, ecological disturbance, crowding, pollution, and the long-term consequences of unregulated or poorly regulated tourism growth. The overall evidence suggests that Digha should not pursue development through visitor expansion alone. Its future depends on sustainable coastal governance: strict land-use control near the shoreline, dune and vegetation restoration, effective waste and wastewater management, continuous monitoring of beach health, local skill development, and stronger community participation in tourism benefits. In short, Digha can remain a successful coastal destination only if development is aligned with environmental carrying capacity and social inclusion.

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