



The development of cruise tourism in India with special reference to West Bengal

Dr. Sreejita Mukherjee

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography

Raja Birendra Chandra College, Kandi, Murshidabad, India

Abstract

Cruise tourism has developed as an important leisure activity from 1970s. At that time, it was exclusively designed for the affluent class. However, the market of cruises have been expanding since 1990s. The middle class now provide a huge market for cruises. India enjoys several natural advantages for the development of this sector. Its long coastline, variety of coastal cultures, navigable stretches of inland waterways contribute towards the development of Ocean cruises as well as river cruises. The government is now developing infrastructure to support cost effective international cruises while ambitious projects like River cruises from Varanasi to Brahmaputra are being designed. This paper examines the potential of cruise tourism in India and West Bengal and attempts to compare the problems and the potential of this sector.

Keywords:

Cruise, Cruise tourism, River cruise, Inland Waterways

Introduction

Waterways was the main means of transport for man since ancient times. They were preferred even over land transport. Several ancient nations were great seafarers. Till the twentieth century, water transport remained the undisputed king. Whether it was for trade, postal service or people visiting relatives or settling abroad, journeys by the sea was the norm. A section of population soon discovered the siren call of the sea. Modern inventions in fields of technology, medicine and food conservation vastly reduced the risks earlier associated with sea travel. Between 1840 and 1920s, luxury sea travel became popular with the affluent section of the society (Sun et al, 2011). But it was still serving an important function. Travel by sea was still the only mode of crossing oceans for people as well as cargo. This scenario changed after the rise of the aviation industry in the Post World War II period. World became faster. People began to use air transport for its speed. Shipping industry was facing significant difficulties, though it still remained the primary mode of transport of cargo. It was at this time that luxury cruises developed. Today, cruise tourism has transformed the face of maritime travel.

Objectives

This study aims at the following:

- i. Describe the unique advantages that India enjoys for the development of cruise tourism
- ii. List the steps taken by the government to develop cruises in India.
- iii. Discuss the pitfalls in the way of developing cruise tourism in India
- iv. Describe the cruise tourism of West Bengal
- v. Suggest methods and ways to help develop cruise tourism in West Bengal

Cruise tourism

Any journey on water bodies like rivers, seas or oceans for the purpose of recreation can be described as a cruise. The length of a cruise may vary from half a day, one day to several days. The primary intention is not to get from one place to another. Rather, it is to enjoy the unique experiences of travel on water bodies. Over the years, cruises have become more and more lavish. It has become a popular mode of recreation of the wealthy. As Dowling says (2006), cruises are mobile resorts rather than means of transportation. This view was also adopted by UNWTO in 2010. Mancini (2004) points out that cruising primarily refers to a vacation based activity. It therefore excludes sailing for transportation, business or one's own personal craft.

When cruise tourism first appeared, it was an activity that was reserved exclusively for the very rich. Transatlantic voyages were expensive. Moreover, cruise tourism was developed targeted towards the affluent classes, offering every conceivable luxury. It was largely restricted to Europe and North America. But now, the market of cruise tourism has been expanded. While ultra luxury crafts continue to cruise the seas, they have been joined by short cruises with all amenities, but affordable to the middle class. Tourists are searching for exotic locations, different adventures, culture and cuisine. Asian region have become a fashionable product for the shipping industry since 1990 (Lau, Sun, 2019). Cruise tourism is expected to be one of the fastest growing sectors of travel and tourism industry.

Cruise tourism can be classified into different types based on various criteria. According to the type of recreation and entertainment offered, cruise tourism can be of following types:

1. Resort cruises typically accommodate 2000 or more passengers. They have an itinerary varying between 3 and 7 days. They offer various types of shipboard entertainments as well as a plethora of facilities akin to a resort hotel. They often include shore excursions for those who are interested.
2. Deluxe or luxury cruises typically cater to a group of about 1000 passengers with highly personalized services. Luxury cabins, fine dining, cultural shows of high value are offered. The length of the cruise may vary between a fortnight to a month.
3. Exotic or Adventure cruises offer standard dining and accommodation, but often offer more chances of exploring new places and shore excursions. Sometimes these cruises are aimed at particular recreation like watching the Northern Lights or the Penguins in the Antarctic Islands or the Seals in the Arctic.

Cruise tourism in India

Cruise tourism has a huge potential of development in India. However, it has largely remained unused. It is only recently that the Government of India has come to recognize the huge economic opportunity offered by this sector. According to Statista, the revenue of the cruise tourism market in India is projected to reach US\$229.96 million by the end of 2025. The government is all set to utilize this opportunity and a detailed cruise tourism development plan has been laid down.

There is scope for developing three types of cruise tourism in India:

1. International cruises – From the historic times, India has occupied a strategic naval position. Today, it offers a unique opportunity to become a part of International Ocean Cruise Circuit. India has a long coastline of 7516 kms. There are nine states bordering this coast – each with their own distinct cultural, natural and culinary heritage. There are 8 – 10 deep water ports, capable of accommodating the tonnage of the large luxury cruise liners. The ports of Mumbai, Cochi, Marmagao, Kolkata, Diu and several others are all in the process of developing infrastructure to support cruise tourism. Large circuits exploring South Asia can be integrated with this type of cruises along Indian coast.
2. Coastal cruise tourism (both domestic and international) – The vast coastline of India offers tremendous opportunities for the growth of domestic cruise tourism along the coast of the country. There are nine states apart from the islands and Union Territories that border the coast and they offer a high variety of landscape. Starting from the Rann of Kutch in the west, across the coastline of Goa and the backwaters of Kerala, the coast then encompasses the broad coasts of eastern India, stretching into the mangrove forest in extreme east. Hence, the opportunities of shore excursions are huge. This sector is likely to grow fastest and become more vibrant in the coming decades.

3. River cruises – India is fortunate in being blessed with a navigable inland waterway of almost 20000 kilometers, making up 110 waterways. This sector is just on the verge of development. Some river cruises have started, but there is huge potential in this sector. Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) is now playing a highly active role in developing this sector of cruise tourism. In January 2024, the First Inland Waterways Development Council meeting was held in Kolkata on the vessel Ganga Queen. In this meeting, Rs 45000 crore was committed for the development of river cruise tourism in India. The budget was divided into two main segments: Rs 35000 crores were allotted to the development of vessels and the rest for developing the necessary infrastructure along the shore. The entire project is supposed to be completed by 2047.

The potential of cruise tourism in India – An analysis

Nature has blessed India with the advantages necessary to become a major cruise destination. If India can develop mid range cruises, its huge middle class with its growing purchasing power and a hunger for travel will easily help to increase the revenue from this sector many times.

Fig. 1: Cruise tourist arrivals in India



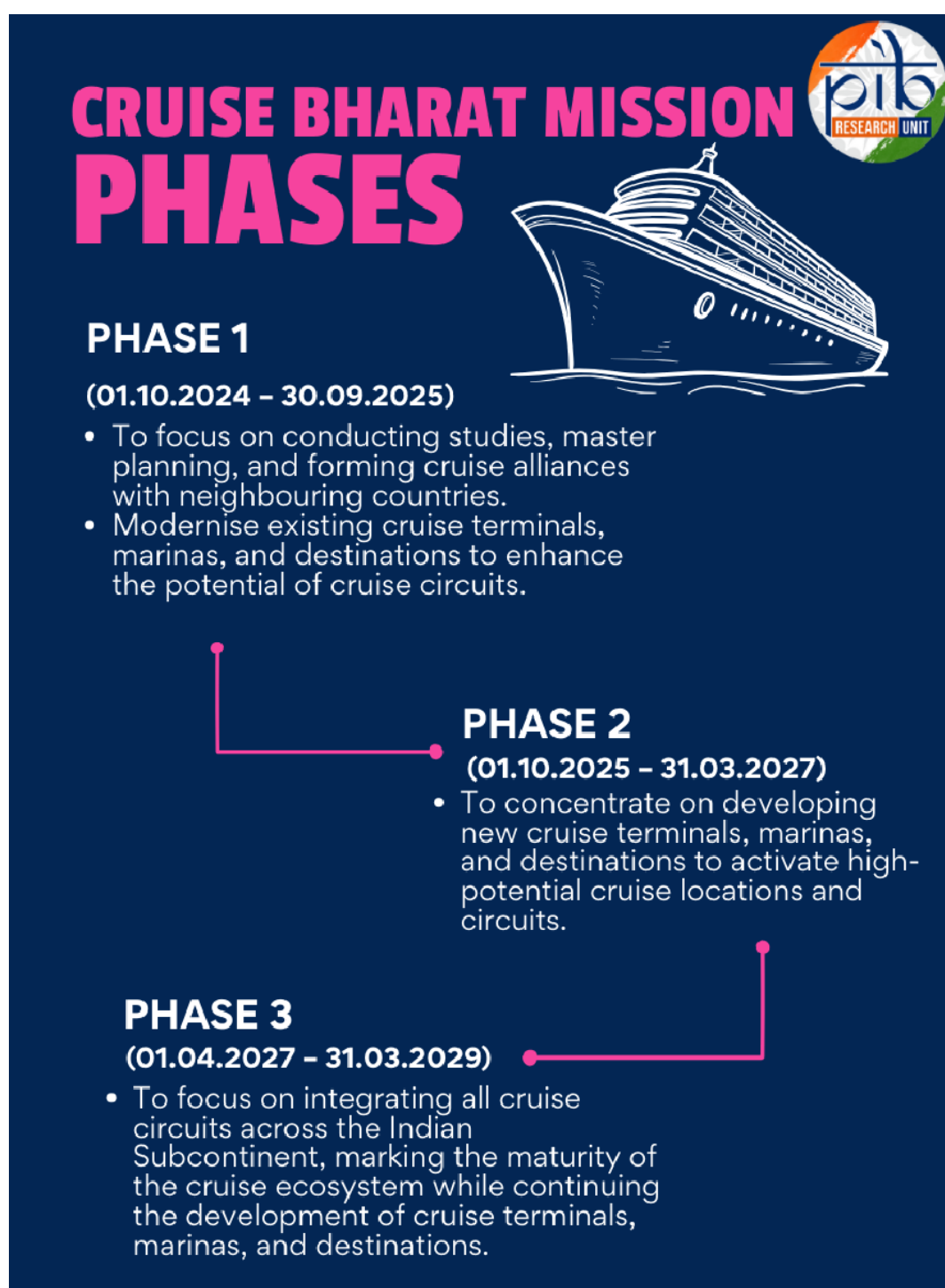
Source: Sailing to New Horizons, IORA, 2024

Some important points regarding cruise tourism in India – its problems and potential, are noted below:

- i. Indian peninsula extends far into the Indian Ocean. The coastline is about 7500 kms long and mostly navigable. There are 20 major ocean going ports along the coast and about 200 minor ports. In his study, Prabhu (2015) pointed out that India was a preferred tourist destination for cruises in 2015-16. At that time, foreign cruise ships were allowed to dock at only three major ports – Mumbai, Kochi and Chennai.
- ii. During the 2020s, Indian Government realized the huge potential of the cruising industry. The Maritime India Vision (MIV) 2030 was adopted as it was calculated that the cruise market of India has the potential to grow eight times during this decade. The MIV is a comprehensive plan which aims to develop necessary infrastructure to lead to the growth of all three types of cruise tourism in India.
- iii. Several steps were taken to increase and attract international cruise traffic to India. These are as follows:
 - a. Rationalized tariff structure with priority to passenger vessels and discounts
 - b. Removal of ousting charges and waiver of cabotage
 - c. Increasing the facility of e-visa and visa on arrival to encourage shore excursions
 - d. Developing world class cruise landing facilities at six ports – Chennai, Mumbai, Goa, New Mangalore, Kochi and Tuticorin.

- e. Currently, cruise tourism is exempt from GST.
 - f. The Ministry of Tourism has developed SOP to deal with cruise vessels. It has coordinated with the Ministry of Shipping to develop a task force to handle all these issues. Several Port Level Committees have been created to deal with the issues of cruise vessels. The Ministry also offers financial assistance to various Port Authorities to develop cruise tourism infrastructure.
 - g. Schemes like “Skill India”, “Make in India” etc offer substantial advantages to domestic cruise tourism companies (Chawla, 2017).
- iv. River cruise tourism is a huge and growing sector of India. The country has long stretch of navigable waterways. There are 110 major waterways in the country with more than 400 rivers. The Government recognized the potential of the river cruise sector and the Cruise Bharat Mission (CBM) was launched in September, 2024. The Mission aims at coordinating various departments and ministries to make India a global cruise tourism hub by 2029. The Program will be executed in three phases and is expected to generate 1.5 million river cruise passengers by March 2029.

Fig. 2.: The Phases of CBM



Source: Adopted from Kumar S., Meena S., Ranek K., 2025; Cruise Tourism in India, A Voyage of New Possibilities; Press Information Bureau; Ministry of Port Shipping and Waterways

Some important points to note about the development of River cruises in India are as follows:

- a. Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) has taken several steps including dredging navigable channels in order to develop inland waterways cruise tourism in India. It set up the Inland Waterways Development Corporation (IWDC). It adopted a plan named River Cruise Tourism Roadmap, 2047 in its inaugural meeting in 2024. Under this plan, it aimed at strengthening the four pillars of Infrastructure, Integration, Accessibility, and Policy and develop 30 possible routes for river cruise tourism (Kumar et al, PIB, 2025)
- b. A significant landmark in River Cruise tourism in India is the launching of the River Cruise “Ganga Vilas” in January 2023. The vessel would cruise across 3200 kms from Varanasi to Dibrugarh, traversing 27 river systems of India and Bangladesh.
- c. IWAI has entered into MoUs with several state governments in order to develop new routes of inland cruises. Some examples include MoU with the Delhi government to develop a 4 kilometer stretch on Yamuna River where solar electric hybrid boats will ply to develop eco friendly sustainable cruise tourism, MoU with Jammu and Kashmir to develop inland cruises on rivers Chenab, Jhelum and Ravi, MoU with governments of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to develop inland cruises etc.
- d. The World Bank has launched a five year project titled South Asia Water Initiative (SAWI). The objective is sustainable management of the river systems of South Asia. One of its initiatives is to develop several river cruise tourism circuits through the Sunderban area encompassing the mangrove forests and the channels of both India and Bangladesh (World Bank Report, 2019).

The difficulties of developing cruise tourism in India

With the launch of major initiatives like Cruise Bharat Mission and Maritime India Vision, 2030, India stands on the cusp of developing a sector that would not only generate huge amount of revenue but also will provide encouragement in conserving and developing its waterways as well as resources on the shores. However, in actual world, there are a number of roadblocks to the realization of this dream. This is best demonstrated by the case of *Amet Majesty* – the first domestic cruise ship of India.

Amet Majesty – the case of failed experiment of cruise tourism in India (Chawla, 2017)

In 2011, Chennai based shipping company called the AMET Group bought a 35 year old sailing vessel called the *Arberia* from its Greek owner and renamed it as *Amet Majesty*. It had the capacity to house 700 passengers and 200 crew members. It was to serve as a training vessel as well as experiment in coastal tourism. In its route, it visited several ports of India, Maldives and Thailand. It offered training opportunities for young cadets. The cruises were offered at affordable rates and were targeted towards the urban middle class. Several facilities were offered. The company invested a total of Rs 100 crores in the project.

In spite of the excellent opportunities presented, the *Amet Majesty* cruises sustained substantial losses and ultimately had to be discontinued. The main reasons were as follows:

- ☐ Harbor charges were levied at each port, driving up the cost.
- ☐ Same standard of security clearance was needed as a foreign vessel. So, the ship did not get any advantage of being an indigenous vessel
- ☐ Charges were calculated in such a manner, that it was actually higher than that of cargo vessels.
- ☐ No preference was given regarding berthing facilities or shore excursions.

The company was forced to discontinue the service in spite of vigorous demand. It subsequently submitted a report to the Union Ministry which became the base of reformulating the cruise policy of the country.

India also faces several practical difficulties in developing River cruise tourism. Most of these problems stem from the lack of goodwill and cooperation among the various states in order to develop the waterways. Moreover, the shore excursion routes and attractions are often not adequately developed. The host population along the shore are not aware or properly sensitized towards tourism. Hence, though there are huge possibilities, India still has a long way to go in developing cruise tourism.

Cruise Tourism in West Bengal

The state of West Bengal enjoys immense advantages as far as the development of cruise tourism is concerned. It has a highly indented shoreline with a number of harbors along the Bay of Bengal. Several river systems crisscross the state. There is also a well developed system of canals which has increased the connectivity. The vast mangrove area of Sunderbans offer unique opportunities for cruising. The state has adopted several initiatives to develop inland cruise tourism at affordable prices. The most crucial efforts are centered on entering into agreements with Bangladesh to develop routes encompassing both the countries. The natural heritage of Sunderbans is so unique that it has been designated as Biodiversity Hot Spot by United Nations. The local culture of the people on its shore are no less interesting. Moreover, there are many historical spots and ruins which can be incorporated in the cruises.

Fig. 3.: Schematic diagram of route of Sunderban Cruise on Indian Side

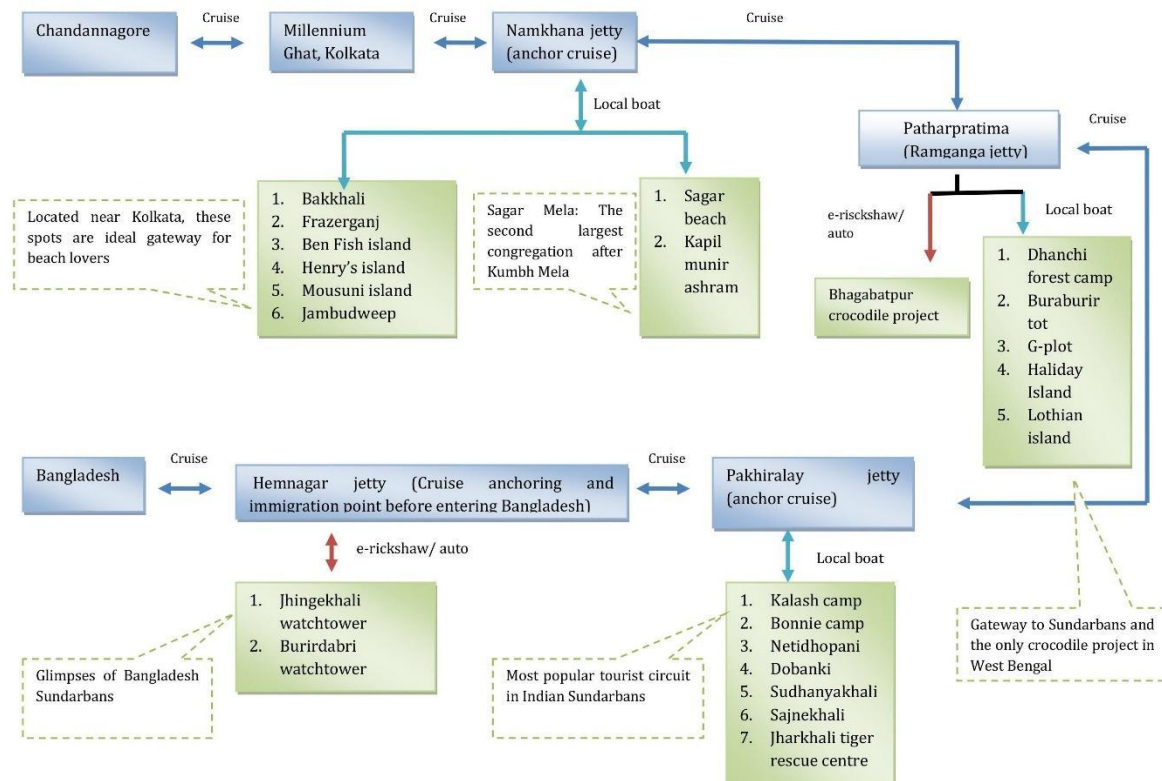
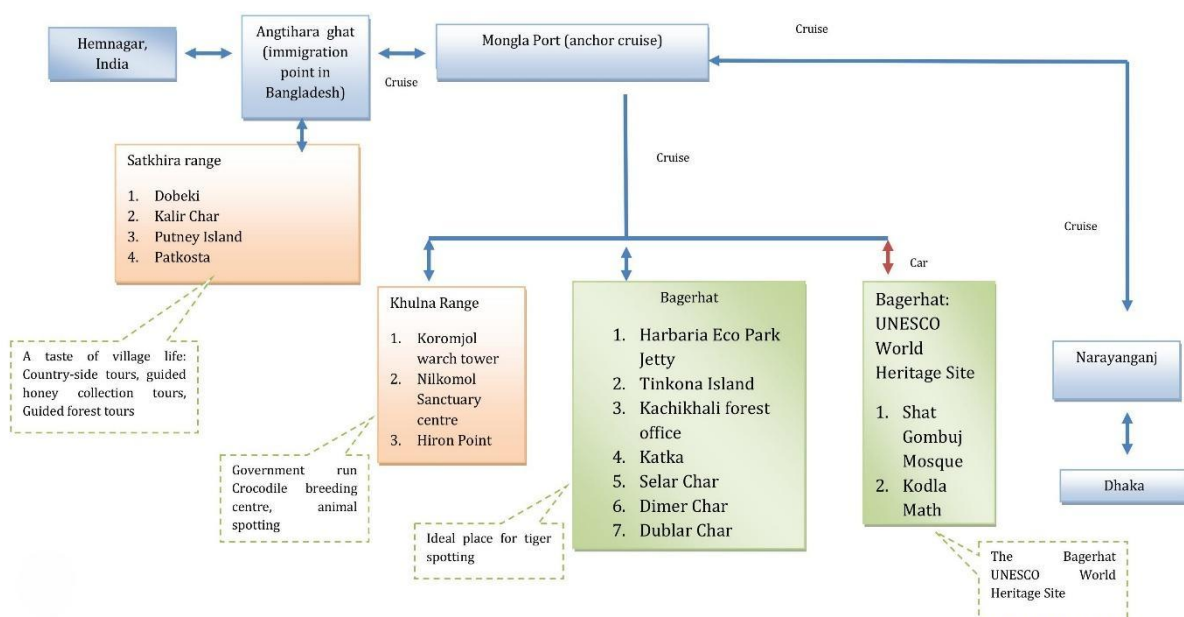


Fig. 4.: Schematic diagram of route of Sunderban Cruise on Bangladesh Side



Source: Conceptual Plan for Integrating Community-based Tourism along the Bangladesh- India Protocol Route for Inland Navigation, Third Draft Report, CUTS International,

Apart from cruise tourism in the mangrove areas of Sunderbans, there are several other cruise circuits that can be developed in the state. The list of functional stretches of National Waterways in West Bengal are as follows:

- NW1 – Varanasi – Kolkata; Ganga River (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal)
- NW97 – Namkhana – Bhagabatpur – Sajnekhali – Hemnagar; Sunderban Waterways (West Bengal)
- NW5 – Bhitarkanika – Hakitola – Paradeep; Matai River and East Coast Canal (Orissa and West Bengal)
- NW47 – Mayapur – Kadamtola; Jalangi River (West Bengal)

In addition to these functional stretches, there are many other short cruises which can be developed in West Bengal. The state is blessed with innumerable rivers. Cruise tourism is a sustainable and eco friendly way of exploiting this resource. The government has entered into public-private-partnership and day cruises are now regularly occurring from the Millenium Park Jetty. You can enjoy Breakfast cruises, Sunset cruises and Evening Cruises on the Ganga river. Short overnight cruises to Mayapur on the north and Sunderbans on the South have been developed. However, long stretches of rivers still lie unutilized.

Suggestions to develop cruise tourism in West Bengal

Cruise tourism has a huge potential in the state of West Bengal. But it also faces some serious issues. In this regard, the following points have been observed:

- Pollution of the rivers is a major problem. When one is cruising on the river, it is not at all nice to see muddy water dotted with plastic wastes and clumps of rotting flowers floating by. All the rivers are nearing their mouth in this state. So, pollution from the entire catchment area gets concentrated here. This creates a degree of visual pollution that is unacceptable for the development of cruise tourism.
- The beautification of the shores is another major necessity. Work in this direction has already started. Riverside promenades have been created in Kolkata, Chandannagor, Bandel etc, but large stretches still remain untouched. The long closed mills along the Hooghly River are major eyesores. The government needs to develop an overall plan to utilize these properties.
- Illegal lifting of sands and stones from river beds have hampered the navigability of many rivers in South Bengal. Strict steps are required to stop this. In addition, regular dredging of the channels are necessary. These steps will vastly improve the flow. This will help in flood control and irrigation and can be used for developing cruise tourism.
- Cruises need to be linked to shore excursions to areas of historical and cultural importance. Cruising on Bhagirathi Hooghly from the Farakka barrage to Kolkata can provide several such points in the districts of Maldah, Murshidabad and Bardhaman. But proper jetties with cruise terminals have to be constructed.
- Another cruise route is the various distributaries of the Bhagirathi Hooghly river. At the time of independence, large boats used to regularly ply up and down these rivers and canals, supplying fresh agricultural produce and fish from the Sunderban region to the city of Kolkata. But since then, most of these canals have been choked. Illegal encroachment as well as unchecked solid waste disposal have completely dried up the canals. The hydro-geology of the deltaic Bengal has been altered, directly contributing to such problems as subsidence of the city of Kolkata and arsenic poisoning in drinking water. Restoring these canals will rejuvenate a market economy, solve several environmental problems as well as create the conditions for beautiful cruises.
- Finally, the state needs to develop standardized procedure of safety and security on the waterways and ensure that they are followed. West Bengal has seen a few recent incidents of boat capsizing with several casualties (Boat capsizing on Rupnarayan River, 08.02.2024; Overturning of Boat in Birbhum while inspecting flood affected area, 19.10.2024; Boat overturned in Murshidabad on Bhagirathi Hooghly, 30.11.2023). The main factor was overloading and lack of supervision.

West Bengal has a huge potential for developing cruise tourism. It can take advantage of the projects like Cruise Bharat Mission, 2024 to appropriate funds for this purpose. However, the success of the state in developing cruise tourism will depend on the successful interaction of several departments and ministries – a task that is not at all easy. It can be concluded that cruise tourism has a very bright future in India and West Bengal should not miss this opportunity.

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