

Prospects and Problems of Tourism Industry in Assam

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ABSTRACT: Tourism is a temporary, short term movement of people to destination outside the places where they normally live and work their activities during the stay at each destination. It can be defined as the organization and operation of holidays especially, commercially. Tourism is now-a-days considered as an important industry which has vast scope for the generation of income and employment. It is one of the world's fastest growing industries, a major source of foreign exchange earner of a nation and a measure for resolving inter state and inter community conflict.

Although the whole north eastern region has tremendous tourism potential, the tourism industry in the area is still miles to go to exploit the proper potentialities. This is mainly due to curse of nature and lack of proper attention of the central government. The state as well as the entire north east region of India has been subjected to century long neglect. Even after 64 years of the country's independence, same kind of central apathy is being continued to the region.

The state of Assam is best known for her unique natural beauty with flora and fauna, historical monuments, pilgrim centre, tea gardens and its colorful cultural festivals. All these can make Assam as one of the best destination of the tourists. The tourism in Assam is mainly based on Wildlife, Tea tourism, Historical Monuments Ethnic cultural heritages etc. Therefore, natural parks and sanctuaries, rivers, lakes, warm water springs, forests, wild life, are the principal components of tourist attraction in the state. The whole tourism potentialities of the state can be grouped together under the categories - Wildlife, Nature Tourism, Tea tourism, Eco Tourism, Cultural Tourism, and Adventure Tourism etc. The present paper has been an attempt to highlight the main prospects and problems of tourism in Assam. The development of tourism in the state during the globalization period has also been analysed on the basis of some secondary data.

KEYWORDS: Tourism, Nature, Festival, Globalization, Development.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a temporary, short term movement of people to destination outside the places where they normally live and work their activities during the stay at each destination. It is defined as the organization and operation of holidays especially, commercially. Tourism is now-a-days considered as an important industry which has vast scope for the generation of income and employment. It is one of the world's fastest growing industries, a major source of foreign exchange earner of a nation and a measure for resolving inter state and inter community conflict.

India joined the club of globalize economy in 1991 when its economy is under the spell of fiscal and balance of payment crisis which compel her to initiate several structural adjustment programmed and economic liberalization. It has opened the door of many new opportunities as well as formidable challenges. All spheres of life as like social, political, cultural and economic have been subjected to both positive and negative elements of globalization. With the increasing concern of widening of inter-state disparities and lack of development, it is highly imperative to assess the effects of globalization on North East India- one of the most backward regions of the country during the globalization period.

Assam is the pioneer state of the North- Eastern Region of India and situated in the far, north-east corner of the country. The total geographical area of the state is 78,438 sq. km, which accounts for about 2.4 percent of the country's total geographical area. Assam shares her border with Arunachal Pradesh in East, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh in West, Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan in North, and Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya & Tripura in

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South. Longitude: 88.250E to 96.00E Latitude: 24.50N to 28.00N. The entire area of Assam can be broadly divided into three well-defined geographical units namely- the Brahmaputra Valley covering the main body of the state in the north, the Barak Valley in the narrow protruding south and the state's Hilly region that separates the two valleys. For administrative and revenue purposes, the 27 districts of the state are divided into 53 Sub-divisions and 149 Revenue circles. Although the potentiality of resources is very high, the state is still lagging behind in respect of economic development. This is mainly due to curse of nature and lack of proper attention of the central government. The state as well as the entire north east region of India has been subjected to century long neglect. Even after 63 years of the country's independence, same kind of central apathy is being continued to the region.

II. PROSPECTS OF TOURISM IN ASSAM

The state of Assam is best known for her unique natural beauty with flora and fauna, historical monuments, pilgrim centre, tea gardens and its colorful cultural festivals. Although the whole north eastern region has tremendous tourism potential, the tourism industry in the area is still miles to go to exploit the proper potentialities. The tourism in Assam is mainly based on Wildlife, Tea tourism, Historical Monuments Ethnic cultural heritages etc. Therefore, natural parks and sanctuaries, rivers, lakes, warm water springs, forests, wild life, are the principal components of tourist attraction in the state. The whole tourism potentialities of the state can be grouped together under the following categories: (a) Wildlife, (b) Nature Tourism, (c) Tea tourism (d) Eco Tourism, (e) Cultural Tourism (f) Pilgrim Tourism (g) Golf Tourism and (h) Adventure Tourism (i) Others.

II.A. WILDLIFE

An attractive feature of the Assam's forestry is its colourful wildlife. Some of species are exclusive to the state. Assam is famous for as the home of one-horned rhinoceros. Some of the other endangered species found in the state are hollock gibbon, the stamp tailed macaque, the capped langur, the golden langur, the pigmy hog, the clouded leopard, the golden cat, the white winged wood-duck, etc. All these can make Assam as one of the best destination of the tourists.

There are five National Parks and eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries for protection and preservation of wildlife in the state. The five National Parks – Kaziranga, Manas, Nameri, Orang and Dibru-Saikhowa covers an area of 1561.14 sq km. The total area covered by eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries is 492.97 sq km.

II.B. NATURE TOURISM

Nature tourism understood in terms of wildlife sanctuaries constitutes the core of tourism in Assam. The state as well as the North-Eastern region of India falls in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. With its dense forests, uneven topography, flora and fauna, snow-clad Himalaya, Blue hills, crystal clear streams, majestic water falls, and large number of national parks, tiger projects, bird sanctuaries etc. offer tremendous opportunities for development of nature tourism. Many rare species of animals & birds are found in Assam. From one end to the other, the state offers to the tourists so many places of natural beauty with wide variety that very few places in the world can compete with it. The tourists, both domestic and foreign, are likely to find these places attracting, nay alluring, provided a well-definite programme of action is evolved. An internationally reputed consultancy firm 'Cooper & Lybrand' submitted a report to the Govt. of Assam in the year 1996, which stated that if the vast tourism potentials of NE India are fully developed within twenty years, the region will receive more tourist than the Singapore and Bangkok. Because almost all the western and Japanese tourists visiting South East Asian region would drive a few hundred kilometers more to enjoy the scenic and cultural beauties of north east region. This alone can boost the economy of entire NE.

II.C. TEA TOURISM

Tea was first discovered in Assam in 1823 by two intrepid British adventurers, Robert and Charles Bruce and since then tea has become an integral part of Assam's economy. It is the largest single industrial sector in the state, which is contributing a bigger share in the state income of Assam. The importance of Tea industry can be realised from the fact that Assam alones produces more than 50% of the country's total tea production. Each of these lush green tea gardens in Assam (*about 1000 in number*) is a treasure house of exotic beauty of nature with colourful people and their

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enchanting songs and dances, sprawling bungalows, and residential facilities. Many of these tea gardens have polo fields and golf courses. There are as many as 30 air strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. These facilities can form into an attractive package for tourism. The road communication to most of the tea gardens is fairly well maintained, and the rest houses and bungalows with modern facilities located there, are generally kept ready for visitors and guests. Therefore, coordination with the management of the tea gardens can effectively do a lot in promoting tea tourism in the state. It may be noted that tea tourism is a recent concept, its potentiality, remains unexplored.

II. D. ECO-TOURISM

Eco-tourism is also a new concept, developed around the idea of travelling to places of natural beauty, moving around and staying with the places of nature for a couple of days. It has the twin objectives of conserving environment and improving the welfare of the local people. Countries like Kenya, Costa Rica, and South Africa have already successfully promoted eco-tourism. Assam has immense scope for eco-tourism, as its scenic natural beauty and favourable climatic conditions. The state is virtually free from industrial pollution. Its green forests, blue hills, enchanting rivers are the basis on which eco-friendly tourism can be developed. In this respect, some primary infrastructural facilities as like- development of good approach road to the spots, good quality tents with provisions for food and other logistics, river cruising and water sports, bird watching towers etc. have to be developed. These facilities are likely to attract eco-tourists. It may be noted that eco-tourism is yet to come to the take-off stage.

II. E. CULTURAL TOURISM

Assam is a home land of various ethnic tribes and groups, each having its own cultural heritage. As per 2001 census, the state has 9 recognized scheduled tribes in the plain districts and 14 in the hill districts i.e. in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills. The tribal population constituted about 12.42% of the total population of the state. Each of these tribes possesses some unique features in its socio-cultural life including customs, religious belief, language, culture, way-of-life, festivals, food habits, songs and dances which are different from others. Most of these people have their own socio-cultural and religious festivals. Songs and dances, display of colourful dresses, tasting of innumerable varieties of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes mark these festivals. Sankardev Kalakhetra, Guwahati, has been organising, in recent years, spring festivals, on the line of the desert festival of Rajasthan, the Rangali Utsav in the month of April in which the various colourful shades of Assam are presented. Moreover, as a part of publicity campaign and to draw tourists, the state's Tourism department also organizes Tea Festival, Barak Valley Festival, Rongali Festival, Dihing patkai Festival, Elephant Festival at Kazironga etc. which can be considered as a good sign for the state's tourism development.

II. F. PILGRIM TOURISM

Assam has many ancient temples and shrines, some of which like Kamakhya, one of the most revered religious places in the country. An average of 1000 visitors visits the Kamakhya temple every day throughout the year. It becomes a centre of attraction in the month of June when it celebrates the Ambubachi mela. At that time more than hundred thousand pilgrims come for pilgrimage from different places of India. Situated on a hill top Kamakhya is also a very beautiful place that attracts many tourists. The other religious places where visitors often come from different parts of the country are- **Borpeta**, Famous for a Vaishnava monastery, **Batadrawa**, Birth place of Shri Sankardeva, the Vaishnava reformer, saint and a great literary figure, **Madan Kamdev**, Vast archeological ruins of fine erotic sculpture, . **Majuli**, The largest river island in the world, centre of Vaishnava culture, seat of many satras which are known as the centres of Assamese art, dance, drama, music, a safe heaven for various migratory birds, **Surya Pahar**, situated on a hill surrounded by innumerable statues of Durga Devi, Ganesha, Surya, Chandra & Buddha. But most of the places do not provide adequate facilities to the tourists and pilgrims, for which these places of religious importance fail to attract a large number of tourists.

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II. G. GOLF TOURISM

There are about 10 golf courses located mostly within the compact areas of tea gardens. The Oil India maintains a very good golf course in the industrial town of Duliajan. These offer a unique opportunity to develop golf tourism in the state. Most of the courses are located near to air-strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. In recent years, domestic and foreign tourists are coming to play golf in different golf courses, and a good number of them use these air-strips and helipads. Golf tourism can be integrated with eco and tea tourism. One has to recognize that some tourists may have more than one interest and may like to combine various aspects of tourism described above.

II. H. ADVENTURE TOURISM

The difficult terrains, valleys, pristine hill and forest, high current rivers etc. offers ideal opportunities to the adventure lovers to go for adventure sports, trekking, rock climbing, rafting etc. The enchanting blue hills and speedy rivers of Assam provide an enormous scope for the development of adventure tourism. Recently, some of the adventure sports activities like rock-climbing, trekking, Para-sailing, water sports, river rafting and angling are promoted by the Department of Tourism. There is an annual angling competition held at Bhalukpong-Potasali side every year in November in which Indian and foreign tourists participate. But other areas of adventure tourism like hang gliding are yet to grow. Assam has a number of ideal places like Nilachal hills (where the Kamakhya temple situated) in the city of Guwahati and the hills around Kaziranga. Since most of the tourists come to the state through Guwahati and visit Kaziranga, there is an enormous scope for hang gliding.

II. I. OTHERS

Besides, the state has some other tourism potential too. Guwahati is situated on the bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra; it is a fast growing metropolis. Though unplanned, it is the gateway to the North-East India. It is well connected with the rest of India by rail, road and air. The airport, known as Gopinath Bordoloi airport, is being upgraded to an international one. The places of worth visiting are: the famous Shakti temple of mother Goddess Kamakhya on the Nilachal hills, the ancient Siva temple Umananda situated on the Peacock island in the middle of the river Brahmaputra, the Navagraha temple, Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Balaji temple, Science Museum, Vaisisthashram (founded by famous sage Vaisistha amidst grand natural beauty), the State Museum, the State Zoo-cum-Botanical garden, the Saraighat Bridge, the Lachit Barphukan Park etc. Moreover, Sualkushi is known as the silk town of Assam, it is famous for Assamese silk, muga (golden thread) and other varieties of silk.

III. TOURIST INFLOW TO ASSAM IN THE GLOBALIZATION ERA

As a part of India's response to the process of Globalization' the central government has adopted the Look East Policy to develop economic relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). With the establishment of India- ASEAN free trade area, the north east will no longer be handicapped by the physical inaccessibility from the rest of the country. In this connection the region stands at the threshold of historical opportunity with a new era of possibilities and also be the gate way for future Asian trade. The north east region including Assam will be developed further as tourist spots attracting more tourists from Europe, America and other parts of the world.

Over the years after globalization, Tourism Industry has witnessed tremendous success and has been rising gradually. It is hopefully expected that the Tourism Industry will be able to fulfill its target there by providing employment and economic benefit to the unemployed youths of the state as well as contribute a substantial share to the state economy in the years to come.

The following table shows the volume of tourist traffic to Assam and revenue earned from the tourists during the globalization period.

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Table-1
Tourists' Traffic and revenue earnings in Assam

Year	Number of Tourists			Revenue Earnings (Rs.inLakh)
	Indian	Foreign	Total	
1990-91	14,373	404	14,777	20.41
1993-94	20,154	404	20,594	21.91
1994-95	16,487	312	16,799	27.95
1995-96	16,168	830	16,998	31.72
1996-97	14,029	841	14,870	33.33
1997-98	14,353	745	15,098	34.72
1998-99	13,631	566	14,197	35.89
1999-2000	9,81,985	6,344	9,88,329	31.72
2000-01	9,61,954	6,920	9,68,874	35.87
2001-02	16,90,672	5,210	16,95,882	38.88
2002-03	12,40,562	6,857	12,47,419	41.03
2003-04	20,30,107	6,854	20,36,952	60.44
2004-05	21,86,250	9,365	21,95,615	69.01
2005-06	25,86,428	8,309	25,94,737	87.11
2006-07	34,79,870	13,657	34,93,527	81.30
2007-08	34,89,814	13,799	35,03,613	94.99

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Assam and Economic Survey, Assam, 2003-04, p.42 & 2008-09, p.80.

The table reveals that though the inflow of tourists in the state is not so encouraging, it has been gradually increased during the globalization period. The total number of tourists (Indian & Foreign) visited the state has increased from 14,777 in 1990-91 to 968874 in 2000-01 and then increased to 35, 03,613 in the year 2007-08. Thus the flow of tourists to the state is slowly picking up.

The opening up of trade of South East Asian countries as visualized in the India's Look East Policy could certainly add some vigor to the land locked and lean economy of NER including Assam. Giving the geo-political situation of the region, cross-border markets are likely to be most cost effective business for surplus production of the region and also for imports of some consumable items in comparison of dealing in far-away main-land markets. From the border point of Arunachal Pradesh, export of India could reach by the Stil- well road to Kunming in South China nearly thousand miles within two days, Yangon in Myanmar within two and half days, Bangkok in four days and Singapore in five/ six days.

The state Tourism Department has just completed glorious 50 years of its existence. Over the years, it has witnessed a considerable success and all round development both infrastructure development and other facilities with the financial help of Government of India as well as the state Government due to increase of fund allocation. The annual plan allocation for the year 2007-08 was Rs. 12.48 crore as against Rs. 4.25 crore in 2006-07. During the period emphasis has been given to infrastructure development of destination and tourist circuit as well as employment generation.

IV. PROBLEMS OF TOURISM IN ASSAM

a. Absence of a Tourism Policy:- Assam has a policy on tourism prepared in November 1987. Unfortunately, it is not available in any of the offices connected with tourism. It appears that there was an attempt in November 1987 to formulate a tourism policy and then in December 1992 an exercise was done to frame certain rules on tourism. It appears that these steps did not bring forth any concrete result. Still the state has no any proper tourism policy.

b. Restricted Area Permit (RAP):- The RAP to the North-Eastern region was enforced in 1955 in the backdrop of alleged missionary involvement in the Naga rebellion. Under this, a foreigner intending to visit North-East including

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Assam had to undergo a long arduous procedure of obtaining permission from the Home Ministry. With RAP in force till May 18, 1999 it was an uphill task for any foreign tourist to visit Assam and other places in the North-East. Unfortunately, the ghost of RAP still continues to loom large and the efforts to disabuse the false apprehension in the mind of the foreign tourists are minimal.

c. Insurgency:- The problem of insurgency has become the stumbling block in the course of development of Assam. It founded every development strategy and hampered all the development work. Kidnapping, extortion, killing, bandh, strikes, and curfews have become the order of the day. The foreign and the domestic tourists consider it risky to visit this part of the country, in view of the prevailing law and order situation. The general impression has been that any foreign or domestic tourist could be a soft target of the insurgents.

d. Lack of Infrastructure:- To attract tourists, there must be dissemination of information, infrastructural facilities like good hotels and tourist lodges, affordable and reliable communication network, clean and hygienic food and accommodation, availability of water sports equipment, and the like. Most of the places of tourist attraction are not by the side of the national highways, and approach roads are in bad condition. This is a strong discouraging factor, which works against a good inflow of the tourist. It appears that the potentialities for developing tourism to a stable source of revenue are not matched by proper policy and strategy.

e. Lack of Coordinated Efforts:- For proper development of tourism industry, there should be proper co-ordination among the all agencies related to the industry. Special emphasis should be given on public and private partnership to tap the unexploited potential opportunities. But in Assam, there is no tangible and effective coordination among the agencies associated with the tourism industry.

f. Absence of trained Tourist Guides:- Assam virtually does not have any trained guides in important places of tourist attraction. Consequently, as the tourists arrive at such a place there is hardly anyone to satisfy the inquisitiveness of the tourists. The Department of Tourism initiated a programme to train tourist guides. But the effort does not yield good result.

V. CONCLUSION

Tourism is a multi- dimensional activity and it covers a large number of economic activities. The spread effect of tourism, therefore, is much wider than any other economic activity. A study by NEDFi found that every domestic tourist creates employment for three persons and every foreign tourist seven persons. It was also estimated that every million rupees invested in tourism, creates 47.9 direct jobs besides many indirect jobs.

It is generally believed that tourists, both domestic and foreign, visit different places in search of specialities, which include a variety of things, such as, beauties of nature, architecture, peace of mind and fulfilment in religious places, new and different variety of food, culture of the people and uncommon adventure. In the midst of so many varieties, tourists make certain common demands, and these are- clean, hygienic and comfortable living accommodation, good transport system to take them from one place to another, decent shops particularly catering to ethnic art, entertainment representing cultural heritage of the place etc.

Assam is richly endowed by nature to become a spotlight of tourism, but mere having a good number of attractive tourist spots is not enough unless all the minimum requirements stated above are not readily available. The 'Cooper & Lybrand' in the year 1996, rightly stated that if the vast tourism potentials of NE India are fully developed within twenty years, the region will receive more tourist than the Singapore and Bangkok.

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