

Neo-Vaishnavism: A Platform To Develop Community-Based Cultural Tourism In The State Of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Neo-Vaishnavism, a platform aimed at developing community-based cultural tourism in the state of Assam, holds significant potential to showcase the rich cultural heritage and religious practices of the region. Assam, located in northeastern India, is renowned for its deep-rooted spiritual traditions and historical importance as the birthplace of Neo-Vaishnavism, a unique devotional movement.

Assam's Neo-Vaishnavism movement centres around the teachings of revered saint-scholar Srimanta Sankardev, who introduced a unique blend of spirituality, music, dance, and drama to disseminate spiritual wisdom among the masses. Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries, known as Sattras, serve as important cultural and religious centres, preserving and propagating the essence of this spiritual tradition. These Sattras also house invaluable artefacts, and manuscripts, and perform traditional art forms, making them ideal destinations for cultural tourism.

The development of community-based cultural tourism in Assam requires a multi-faceted approach. It involves collaborating with local communities, empowering them through capacity-building initiatives, and facilitating infrastructure development to ensure their active participation in the tourism value chain. By fostering cultural sensitivity and responsible tourism practices, neo-Vaishnavism as a platform can contribute to the economic growth of the region while preserving its cultural fabric.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavism, Community-based Tourism, Cultural Tourism, Community Empowerment

1. Introduction

1.1 Neo-Vaishnavism:

Neo-Vaishnavism, also known as the Ekasaran Naam Dharma, is a religious and cultural movement that emerged in Assam, a northeastern state of India. Rooted in the ancient philosophy of Vaishnavism, Neo-Vaishnavism represents a unique synthesis of *bhakti* (devotion) and cultural identity, blending spiritual teachings with the indigenous Assamese traditions. This religious movement gained prominence in the 15th century with the arrival of the influential saint-reformer Srimanta Sankardev and continues to exert a profound influence on the socio-religious fabric of Assam to this day.

The essence of Neo-Vaishnavism lies in the fusion of *bhakti*, or intense devotion, with the preservation of Assamese cultural identity. Srimanta Sankardev, the principal architect of this religious movement, sought to integrate the religious and cultural practices of the local populace within the framework of Vaishnavism. Central to this synthesis was the recognition of the power of *bhakti* to transcend social barriers and establish a direct connection between the devotee and the divine. Sankardev's teachings emphasized the universality of devotion, emphasizing that anyone, regardless of caste, gender, or social status, could attain salvation through unwavering faith and devotion.

Moreover, Neo-Vaishnavism incorporated various elements of Assamese culture, including music, dance, drama, and literature, to propagate its teachings and engage the masses. Sankardev composed numerous devotional songs (*Borgeets*), established the tradition of religious theatre (*Ankia Naat*), and introduced the concept of *Thaan*, later known as *Sattr*, the monastic institutions that served as centres for spiritual and cultural activities. Through these mediums, Neo-Vaishnavism not only fostered a sense of religious devotion but also promoted the preservation and propagation of Assamese art, literature, and traditions.

The emergence of Neo-Vaishnavism had a profound impact on the social, cultural, and religious landscape of Assam. The movement played a significant role in fostering a sense of unity among the diverse communities of the region, transcending linguistic, ethnic, and caste divisions. Neo-Vaishnavite teachings emphasized moral values, ethical conduct, and social harmony, contributing to the promotion of a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

Furthermore, the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism extended beyond the religious sphere, shaping various aspects of Assamese society. The integration of local cultural elements into the religious practices led to the development of a distinct cultural identity that celebrated the rich heritage of Assam. This cultural resurgence manifested in various forms, such as the vibrant Bihu festival, which combines elements of Vaishnavite philosophy, folk dances, and indigenous music.

The Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam represents a unique religious and cultural movement that synthesizes the principles of *bhakti* with the preservation of Assamese cultural identity. Through the efforts of Srimanta Sankardev, this religious movement emerged as a unifying force, fostering social harmony and promoting a sense of cultural pride among the people of Assam. The enduring influence of Neo-Vaishnavism is reflected in the continued celebration of its teachings, rituals, and cultural practices in Assam, making it an integral part of the region's religious and cultural fabric.

1.2 Cultural Tourism:

Cultural tourism has emerged as a prominent sector within the broader tourism industry, focusing on travel experiences that immerse individuals in the rich cultural heritage and practices of a particular destination. It encompasses activities such as visiting historical sites, attending traditional festivals, exploring museums and art galleries, engaging in local cuisine, and interacting with local communities. The allure of cultural tourism lies in the desire for authentic and meaningful encounters with diverse cultures, promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. This paper examines the significance of cultural tourism as a catalyst for economic development, preservation of cultural heritage, and fostering intercultural dialogue.

Cultural tourism holds great economic potential for destinations, contributing to job creation, revenue generation, and local economic growth. As tourists engage in cultural experiences, they often spend money on accommodations, dining, transportation, and local products, which injects capital into local businesses and stimulates the overall economy (Richards & Wilson, 2006). Additionally, cultural tourism can extend the tourism season by attracting visitors during off-peak periods, thus generating a more sustainable flow of tourism income (Hjalager, 2010).

Preservation of cultural heritage is another significant aspect of cultural tourism. As destinations recognize the value of their cultural assets, they become more motivated to conserve and protect them. Cultural tourism can serve as a financial incentive for the maintenance and restoration of historical sites, monuments, and cultural artefacts (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2003). This conservation effort not only benefits future generations but also enhances the overall attractiveness of the destination, drawing in more tourists interested in authentic cultural experiences.

Furthermore, cultural tourism plays a pivotal role in fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding. Through direct interactions with local communities, tourists gain insights into different customs, traditions, and ways of life. This exposure promotes tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect among individuals from diverse backgrounds (Hall, 2007). Cultural tourism acts as a vehicle for breaking down cultural barriers, dispelling stereotypes, and building bridges between people from different cultures, thereby contributing to a more harmonious global society.

Cultural tourism offers a unique and enriching travel experience that goes beyond mere sightseeing. Its economic benefits, role in cultural preservation, and promotion of intercultural dialogue make it a vital component of the tourism industry. As destinations continue to recognize the potential of their cultural heritage, it becomes increasingly important to harness the power of cultural tourism for sustainable development and mutual cultural understanding.

1.3 Community-Based Tourism:

Community-based tourism (CBT) is an approach to sustainable tourism development that prioritizes the active involvement and empowerment of local communities in the planning, management, and benefits derived from tourism activities. CBT seeks to enhance local ownership, preserve cultural heritage, and foster economic opportunities while minimizing negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts. This concept recognizes the pivotal role of communities in shaping and sustaining tourism, emphasizing their rights, aspirations, and capacity to influence the development process.

CBT has gained significant attention in recent years as a means to promote responsible and inclusive tourism practices. By engaging local communities as active participants rather than passive recipients, CBT aims to create a more equitable and mutually beneficial relationship between visitors and host communities. This approach facilitates cultural exchange, fosters intercultural understanding, and supports the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices.

The involvement of local communities in the decision-making processes of tourism planning is a fundamental principle of CBT (Honey, 2008). Active participation enables communities to voice their concerns, express their aspirations, and contribute to the development and management of tourism activities. Such involvement ensures that tourism development aligns with the needs and priorities of the community, minimizing the risk of displacement, exploitation, or cultural erosion.

Preserving cultural authenticity and heritage is another core aspect of CBT. Tourism activities should respect and showcase the unique cultural traditions, practices, and artefacts of the host community (Fennell, 2019). By embracing cultural diversity, CBT enhances the visitor experience, encourages cultural exchange, and contributes to the revitalization and preservation of local heritage.

2. Literature Review:

Neo-Vaishnavism is a contemporary religious and philosophical movement that emerged within the broader Vaishnavism tradition of Hinduism.

Neo-Vaishnavism represents a revivalist movement within Vaishnavism, focusing on the devotional worship of Lord Vishnu or his avatar, Lord Krishna. It emphasizes the personal and emotional connection with the divine through practices such as *bhakti* (devotion), *kirtan* (chanting), and *seva* (service) (Goswami, 2002). Key concepts within Neo-Vaishnavism include the divine grace of the deity, the importance of spiritual gurus, the power of devotional love, and the pursuit of *moksha* (liberation) through surrender and devotion.

The roots of Neo-Vaishnavism can be traced back to the 15th and 16th centuries in the regions of Bengal and Odisha, India. Prominent figures such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and Vallabhacharya played pivotal roles in the revitalization of devotional practices and the spread of Vaishnavism (Sen, 2011). These leaders emphasized the worship of Krishna as the Supreme Being and advocated for the democratization of religious experiences through devotional practices accessible to all.

Neo-Vaishnavism incorporates various theological perspectives within its framework. It emphasizes the belief in a personal relationship with the divine, where devotees experience the presence of God through their heartfelt devotion (Rodrigues, 2016).

Neo-Vaishnavism has had profound cultural impacts on religious practices, literature, art, music, and social dynamics. The movement's devotional practices, such as congregational chanting (*kirtan*) and ecstatic dance (*sankirtan*), have become integral parts of religious gatherings and festivals (Borah, R., 2016).

Community-based tourism (CBT) is an approach that emphasizes the active involvement of local communities in the planning, development, and management of tourism activities. This model aims to promote sustainable tourism practices, empower communities, and preserve cultural heritage. This literature review examines the key concepts, benefits, challenges, and impacts associated with community-based tourism. The review also highlights relevant studies and provides insights into the current state of CBT.

Community-based tourism involves the collaboration between tourists, local communities, and various stakeholders to create tourism experiences that are culturally authentic and environmentally responsible (Hall, 2011). It seeks to maximize the positive impacts of tourism while minimizing the negative effects on local communities. The key concepts related to CBT include community empowerment, capacity building, cultural preservation, sustainable development, and equitable distribution of benefits.

CBT offers numerous benefits for both the host communities and tourists. First, it empowers local communities by involving them in decision-making processes and providing economic opportunities (Mowforth & Munt, 2015). CBT can enhance cultural preservation by encouraging the revival of traditional practices and fostering pride in local heritage. Additionally, CBT can lead to the conservation of natural resources and promote sustainable development by incorporating environmental stewardship practices.

Despite its potential benefits, CBT faces several challenges. One significant challenge is the capacity building and training of community members to effectively participate in tourism activities (Pulido-Fernández et al., 2017). Lack of infrastructure, limited access to capital, and inadequate marketing strategies also pose obstacles to the successful implementation of CBT initiatives. Balancing tourism development with the preservation of community identity and authenticity is another challenge that requires careful management.

Research has shown that CBT can have positive impacts on the socio-economic well-being of host communities. It can generate income and employment opportunities, reduce poverty, and enhance local businesses (Gursoy et al., 2019). Furthermore, CBT has the potential to strengthen community cohesion and foster cultural exchange between tourists and residents. However, negative impacts such as increased dependency on tourism, changes in social structures, and environmental degradation should also be carefully addressed.

3. Objectives of the Research

1. Study the potential of community-based tourism for promoting Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage in Assam.
2. Suggest strategies for leveraging Neo-Vaishnavism as a platform for cultural tourism.

3. Research Methodology

This research is done using the explorative and descriptive methodologies and the same would be mostly qualitative. The data to achieve all the objectives will be from secondary sources.

5. Community-based Tourism to Promote Neo-Vaishnavite Cultural Heritages:

Community-based tourism has significant potential for promoting the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage in Assam. Assam, with its rich history and cultural diversity, is home to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, which was initiated by the great saint-reformer Srimanta Sankardev in the 15th century. This movement has left a lasting impact on the social, religious, and artistic fabric of Assam.

Here are some ways in which community-based tourism can contribute to the promotion of Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage in Assam:

5.1 Preservation and Conservation: Community-based tourism initiatives can actively involve local communities in the preservation and conservation of Neo-Vaishnavite cultural sites, monuments, and artefacts. By raising awareness among community members about the importance of their cultural heritage, they can actively participate in its protection and maintenance.

5.2 Cultural Experiences: Community-based tourism allows travellers to engage directly with the local communities and experience their way of life, traditions, and rituals. Visitors can participate in cultural activities like traditional music and dance performances, *Bhaona* (Neo-Vaishnavite theatrical performances), and workshops on traditional art and craft forms like mask-making and handloom weaving.

5.3 Homestays and Local Accommodation: Encouraging community members to open their homes for tourists as homestays or establishing small-scale local accommodations can provide visitors with an authentic experience of the Neo-Vaishnavite culture. This not only generates income for the community but also fosters cultural exchange between tourists and locals.

5.4 Guided Tours and Interpretation: Local community members can be trained as guides who can offer guided tours of Neo-Vaishnavite heritage sites, providing historical and cultural insights. These guides can also act as interpreters, explaining the significance of various rituals, practices, and symbols associated with the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition.

5.5 Cultural Festivals and Events: Community-based tourism can support the organization of cultural festivals and events that showcase the Neo-Vaishnavite heritage. These events can include religious processions, music and dance festivals, art exhibitions, and spiritual discourses, providing a platform for the community to display its cultural richness to a wider audience.

5.6 Skill Development and Income Generation: Community-based tourism initiatives can focus on skill development programs that help local artisans and craftsmen improve their traditional craftsmanship. This can enhance their income-earning opportunities by producing and selling traditional crafts, textiles, and artefacts related to the Neo-Vaishnavite culture.

5.7 Awareness and Education: Community-based tourism can play a crucial role in raising awareness about the Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage among both locals and visitors. Educational programs, workshops, and interactive sessions can be organized to educate people about the historical significance, values, and teachings of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

By embracing community-based tourism, Assam can harness the collective efforts of local communities, government agencies, and tourism stakeholders to preserve, promote, and celebrate the unique Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritage. This approach not only helps in cultural conservation but also contributes to the socio-economic development of the communities and encourages responsible and sustainable tourism practices.

6. Strategies for leveraging Neo-Vaishnavism as a platform for cultural tourism:

Leveraging neo-Vaishnavism as a platform for cultural tourism requires strategic planning and implementation. Here are some strategies that can be adopted to promote Neo-Vaishnavism as a cultural tourism asset:

6.1 Heritage Site Development: Identify and develop key Neo-Vaishnavite heritage sites, such as the Sattras and cultural centres, to make them visitor-friendly. Improve infrastructure, signage, and amenities to enhance the visitor experience while respecting the sanctity of these sites.

6.2 Interpretive Centres and Museums: Establish interpretive centres or museums dedicated to Neo-Vaishnavism, showcasing its history, philosophy, art, and cultural artefacts. These centres can offer interactive exhibits, audiovisual presentations, and guided tours to educate and engage visitors.

6.3 Cultural Trails and Pilgrimage Routes: Create well-defined cultural trails or pilgrimage routes that connect significant Neo-Vaishnavite heritage sites. Develop informative guidebooks or mobile applications that provide historical and cultural insights along the routes, encouraging visitors to explore and experience the richness of Neo-Vaishnavism.

6.4 Cultural Events and Festivals: Organize regular cultural events and festivals that celebrate Neo-Vaishnavite traditions. These can include music and dance performances, religious processions, spiritual discourses, and art exhibitions. Promote these events to attract tourists and provide opportunities for cultural exchange.

6.5 Cultural Experiences and Workshops: Offer immersive cultural experiences and workshops that allow tourists to engage with Neo-Vaishnavite practices. This can include participation in Bhaona (theatrical performances), traditional music and dance workshops, mask-making or handloom weaving sessions, and meditation or yoga classes.

6.6 Collaboration with Sattras and Community: Forge partnerships with Sattras (Neo-Vaishnavite monastic institutions) and local communities to involve them actively in cultural tourism initiatives. Encourage Sattras to open their doors to tourists, allowing them to witness religious ceremonies, interact with monks, and learn about the Neo-Vaishnavite way of life.

6.7 Marketing and Promotion: Develop targeted marketing campaigns that highlight the unique aspects of Neo-Vaishnavism as a cultural tourism attraction. Utilize various channels, including social media, travel websites, and print media, to create awareness and attract domestic and international tourists interested in cultural heritage experiences.

6.8 Training and Capacity Building: Provide training and capacity-building programs for local communities, tour operators, guides, and hospitality staff. This ensures that they have the knowledge and skills to deliver high-quality cultural tourism experiences and effectively communicate the essence of Neo-Vaishnavism to visitors.

6.9 Responsible Tourism Practices: Emphasize responsible tourism practices that promote sustainability and respect for the local community and the environment. Encourage tourists to support local artisans, purchase ethically produced crafts, and contribute to community-based initiatives aimed at the preservation and development of Neo-Vaishnavite heritage.

6.10 Research and Documentation: Support research and documentation efforts to deepen the understanding of neo-Vaishnavism and its cultural heritage. Encourage scholars, historians, and researchers to collaborate with local communities and institutions to unearth hidden narratives and preserve the knowledge associated with this tradition.

By implementing these strategies, Neo-Vaishnavism can be positioned as a vibrant cultural tourism platform, attracting visitors who seek authentic and enriching experiences while contributing to the preservation and promotion of this unique cultural heritage.

7. Conclusion:

The findings of this paper shed light on the significant potential of neo-Vaishnavism as a platform for developing community-based cultural tourism in the state of Assam. The rich cultural heritage associated with Neo-Vaishnavism presents a unique opportunity to preserve, promote, and celebrate the traditions and values that have shaped the identity of the Assamese people. Neo-Vaishnavism holds immense potential as a catalyst

for cultural tourism in Assam. By preserving, promoting, and celebrating this unique cultural heritage, Assam can not only attract tourists but also empower local communities and contribute to the conservation of its rich traditions. However, successful implementation of these strategies will require collaboration among various stakeholders, including government bodies, local communities, and tourism industry players, to ensure that the benefits of cultural tourism are realized while preserving the authenticity and integrity of Neo-Vaishnavite cultural heritages.

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