

# Rural Tourism And Economic Development Of Assam

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## ABSTRACT

The development of a strong platform around the concept of Rural Tourism is definitely useful for a state like Assam, where about 70% of the population resides in villages. Moreover, Assam is a conglomeration of various ethnic tribes and groups each having a distinct language, culture, festivals, songs, and dances. The rural Assam has a great potential to attract tourists who are in search of authentic natural and cultural resources. But unfortunately this potential has not been utilized properly. Though the Assam government adopts some schemes they can only give an average result. This is the result of some difficulties lies in Assam. The present study is an attempt to highlight the potentialities of rural tourism as a path to the socio-economic development of Assam and various challenges faced by the state in this regard on the basis of secondary sources of data. Besides, the paper suggests ways for improvement of the tourism industry as a perspective tool for the socio-economic development of Assam.

**Index Terms:** Assam, Livelihood, Rural tourism, Socio-economic development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is a form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience. Rural tourism is a recent offshoot of tourism sector that has grown up to be a potential business in its own space. It is a significant strategy for rural development by providing an alternate source of livelihood and large scale employment opportunities in the rural areas. Most of the countries of the world have recognized rural tourism as an important instrument for sustainable livelihood of the rural people.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future [Department for International Development, 1999].

Rural tourism has made important contributions to rural incomes both at the level of the individual farmer and more widely in the local community. While not necessarily substituting for agricultural income, it has delivered supplementary income and inter-sectoral linkages. The national tourism policy introduced in 2002, identified rural tourism as a focus area to generate employment and promote sustainable livelihoods through development of art, craft, culture, heritage, handloom, etc. Rural tourism is not the end, but the means to stimulate economic growth, to increase the viability of underdeveloped locations, and to improve the living standards of local populations.

In Assam about 70 per cent of the population live in rural areas and are dependent primarily on agriculture. But rural Assam has much to offer beyond agriculture. It has a great potentiality for different segments of tourism like eco-tourism, adventure tourism, health tourism, farm tourism, nature base tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism etc.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Rural tourism is one of the most significant drivers of economic growth, community development and poverty alleviation in the developing countries of the world. The study was conducted in South Africa and found that tourism had grown significantly and had a favourable impact on the economic development of the

rural communities' in the countries. According to the study rural tourism in South Africa contributes in economic development, eradication of poverty and also helps in correcting income inequality among rural community (Thomas, 2002).

Brown (2003) has primarily emphasized on studies dealing with rural tourism of United States but some international studies are also included. The author has found a number of studies highlight the important role that rural tourism can play in sustainable livelihood and describing the potential benefits in purely economic terms - for example, by citing the impact of tourism on jobs created, income added, or local tax revenues. He has found some studies stresses the positive effects that tourism can bring to quality of life issues, including a greater sense of place for rural residents, an upgrading of local cultural facilities, or an enhancement of regional conservation efforts.

According to Halder (2007) rural tourism will emerged as an important instrument for sustainable development including poverty alleviation, employment generation, environmental regeneration and development of remote areas and advancement of women and other disadvantaged groups in the country apart from promoting social integration and international understanding. The government should promote rural tourism to ensure sustainable economic development and positive social change.

One recent OECD report notes that in the international tourism industry "the major players represent less than 10% of the tourism enterprises but account for more than half of total turnover in the sector and for a significant proportion of employment" (OECD, 2007). Although small tourism firms represent over 95 per cent of enterprises in the South African tourism economy, it is recognized that six large companies control between 60-70 percent of the country's entire tourism industry (Cornelissen, 2005). International research suggests, however, that SMEs can be "a dynamic agent of tourism development and growth" (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2007). Moreover, support for small tourism enterprise development should be integral to the development and promotion of 'responsible tourism' in rural areas (Rogerson, 2008).

According to Farooq et al (2012), tourism has direct positive impact on employment generation and the level of income. Tourism boosts individual economic gain, encourages improvisation of traditional resource-use system, converts local natural resources into commodities, and transforms rural areas into emerging hub of resources allocation.

Kakkar and Sapna (2012) have made a study on impact of tourism on Indian economy and they mainly focus on how India is emerging as a global tourist centre because of innovation and creating value for tourist. They have found that significant contribution of travel and tourism industry on country's employment generation and GDP growth.

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

The study has been taken up with the following objectives.

- I.To ascertain the trend and composition of tourist inflow into Assam over the last ten years.
- II.To highlight the various challenges faced by the tourist and providers of rural tourism services.
- III.To suggest ways for improvement of the impact of rural tourism as a perspective tool of rural development in Assam.

### **4. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY**

The information regarding this study has been collected mainly from secondary sources of data. The main sources of the data are published and unpublished sources like books, journals, reports, unpublished doctoral thesis and concerned websites etc. Secondary data from the Tourism Department of the Govt of Assam has been used to get an overview of the trend and composition of tourist inflow into Assam.

### **5. ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY AND FINDINGS**

Assam is a paradise for tourists. It is a state of multi-community, multi-culture, multi-religion along with the enchanting hills, dancing rivers, roaring waterfalls, thick and dark forests, heavy rains during monsoon, innumerable varieties of flora and fauna, countless species of animals and plants, mysterious clouds, melodious folk music, thrilling dances and festivals, variety of delicious dishes, handlooms and handicrafts, and above all its green landscape used to attract people from different parts of the world since immemorial time. Assam has been fascinating millions of people by its aura of myths, mystery, music, mountains, all the gifts of nature. The ungrudging blessings of nature have made tourism in Assam essentially nature-centric, despite the fact there are historical and religious places of tourist attraction. But still it attracts very few tourists.

### 5.1 Present Scenario of Tourism in Assam:

Though Assam has been hospitable to visitors from an ancient era, yet tourism started flourishing only after the establishment of the Directorate of Tourism of Assam in 1959. Over the years, since 1959, this department has made considerable progress in this sector. The total number of tourists that Assam has been receiving and its composition from 2009-10 to 2018-19 and the revenue generated is shown in the following table.

**Table 1: Trend and Composition of Tourist Inflow and Revenue Collection from Tourism in Assam.**

Year	No. of tourists inflow		Revenue (Rs. in Lakh)
	Domestic	Foreigner	
2009-10	3895525	14694	131.63
2010-11	4127447	15585	143.6
2011-12	4408336	16660	184.49
2012-13	4544666	17708	248.19
2013-14	4444393	19086	191.32
2014-15	4863826	20005	211.77
2015-16	5642950	26320	1057.24
2016-17	5413877	28419	252.39
2017-18	5934394	31739	1289.64
2018-19	6027002	41209	1391.2

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Govt. of Assam.

The above table indicates that there is some sort of fluctuation, both in the number of tourists and the revenue collected there from. These figures indicate that the inflow of foreigner is much lesser than domestic tourist into Assam.

Although Assam has been progressing in tourism, yet it was not there in the list of the top ten states of India in respect of domestic as well as foreign tourists. It thus, wouldn't be wrong to state that Assam has not been very successful in the tourism industry. The growth trend of foreign tourist influx reveals that the growth has maintained an increasing trend. It is however to be noted that the rise has been comparatively at a lower level than that of domestic tourist influx. The improvement in tourist spots has definitely helped in capturing more foreign visitors. Kaziranga still remains a favourite tourist destination for them. However further improvements are required in the tourist spots to increase their number.

### 5.2 Tourism and Economic Development:

Rural tourism has made important contributions to rural incomes both at the level of the individual farmer and more widely in the local community. While not necessarily substituting for agricultural income, it has delivered supplementary income and inter-sectoral linkages. The national tourism policy introduced in 2002, identified rural tourism as a focus area to generate employment and promote sustainable livelihoods through development of art, craft, culture, heritage, handloom, etc.

Rural tourism encompasses a broad range of activities yet it is often seen to be synonymous with 'farm tourism'. Villages in Assam have made a cocktail of its hospitality with the traditional way of farming to attract more tourists, creating a heady concoction called "Farm Tourism" being developed as a relatively new tourism product. Assam is famous for tea, polu, muga, bamboo specially. Assam has a substantial share in their production. Assam, being an agricultural dominated state, has tremendous potential for developing Farm Tourism in a big way without much additional investment which may develop the Assam economy. Apart from the above, a number of different activities, including horticulture, forestry, and fishery are also performed here.

Since 1823 i.e. after its discovery in Assam, tea has become an integral part of Assam's economy. 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 enchanting songs and dances, sprawling bungalows, and residential facilities. Many of these tea gardens have polo fields and golf courses. These facilities can form into an attractive package for tourism in rural Assam recently known as tea tourism.

Besides the farm activities various non-farm activities like handloom, textiles, sericulture, products using cane, bamboo, bell metal and brassware has contributed towards the development of tourism in the rural areas through which both foreign and domestic tourist knows about the cultural entity and background of Assam. Again by selling these items directly to the tourist, producers can earn a large amount of money. There is a large potential market for farm-based rural tourism especially for foreign tourists in Assam. The urban population having roots in villages always have had the curiosity to learn about sources of food, plants, animals, raw materials like wood, handicrafts, languages, culture, tradition, dresses and rural lifestyle. Rural

Tourism in Assam which revolves around farmers, village culture and agriculture has the capacity to satisfy the curiosity of this segment of population.

The rural areas in Assam have a great potential to attract tourists who are in search of authentic natural resources. Assam is known for its bio-geographic richness. With its dense forests, uneven topography, flora and fauna, the majestic Brahmaputra and its tributaries, wild life sanctuaries and many rare and endangered species of animals, Assam offers basically nature-centric tourism in Assam. Ayurveda which is a pro-nature medical approach has roots in villages. In the forests of Assam various medicinal plant are found. It also conveys a scope to attract tourist to village. Tourism gives an impetus to State income. International as well as domestic tourists contribute a significant share as it constitutes a demand for goods and services that would not be otherwise produced or constructed before, such as demand for accommodation, modern airports, hotels, lodges, etc. This would not only contribute to the revenue of the government but shall also encourage investment.

### **5.3 Current Challenges of the Tourism promotion in Assam:**

Despite immense tourism potential that the region shows, it has not been able to cash in on the same failing even in the domestic market. While in case of India, many States have shown the required urgency to promote tourism as a major industry, Assam seems to take a backseat and is unaware of its enormous tourism potential bestowed by nature and harnesses it in a sustainable manner. There are, however several reasons for this

**Inadequate Infrastructure:-** Hilly and inhospitable terrains, porous borders, highly inadequate road links, extremely poor transport connectivity, limited air services, inadequate rail links and weak telecommunication infrastructure, etc has restricted the growth of tourism in the State. 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. Apart from the infrastructural bottleneck, inferior food quality, lack of well arranged package tour, polluted environment, poor service at the hotels and tourist guest houses, lack of facilities like good hotels and tourist lodges, affordable and reliable communication network, etc have been hampering the expected development and promotion of tourism in the state.

**Insurgency:-** The media often tends to focus on the ethnic conflicts and under development of the State neglecting the pioneering development efforts made in the region. It has been engraved in the minds of the general populace by the media that nothing significant is happening in the region other than violence, bomb-blasts, kidnappings, extortions, etc. 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.

**Absence of Tourist Guides:-** Assam virtually does not have any trained guides placed 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. The effort did not yield good result as most of the trainees left the job. Some of them found other means of livelihood while others found it to be less paying because of the poor inflow of the tourists to the state.

**Lack of Coordinated Efforts:-** There is a palpable lack of coordination among several agencies like Department of Tourism and Department of Archaeology in handling the demands of the tourists in places of both historic and religious importance. There is virtually no coordination between various public industries and private sectors like tea industry, oil and coal on one hand, and the Department of Tourism or Assam Tourist Development Corporation (ATDC), on the other. This is definitely a major bottleneck on the way of tourism industry.

**Underdeveloped Human Resource:-** The tour operators, hoteliers, transporters, tourist guides etc are not trained enough to provide detailed information to the tourists regarding the region which obviously is a barrier in the path of development of tourism industry in Assam.

Thus despite abundance of natural beauty, the flow of incoming tourist has been marginal for the reasons of the lack of infrastructural and other related facilities in various tourist spots in the state.

### **5.4 Strategies for promoting rural tourism in Assam:**

Projecting this State as a tourist haven, the Union Tourism Ministry has been releasing enhanced Central assistance for tourism development. The Government has also encouraged the youths to enter this sector. However, the Government's repeated claim to convert State into a visitor's paradise has not been realized yet. The bold steps introduced by the Government from time to time have to be taken and implemented in a more systematic and organized manner. There should be transparency and accountability in the substantial budgetary grants being made to Assam Tourism sector because without accountability, there will be no responsibility and without responsibility, there will not be proper implementation of policies and programmes. Initiatives should, therefore, be taken by the government to accelerate the rate of investment in

tourism facilities for building new industrial parks, special economic zones, airports, etc with all infrastructural facilities.

However, in the recent years, the State Tourism Department 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. For the growth of tourism sector, special emphasis has been given on public and private partnership to tap the unexplored potential opportunities. Mention can be made here of the TATA's which have decided to set up Vivanta by Taj, the north east's first five star hotel which would undoubtedly attract huge number of foreign tourist. The Department has also undertaken ambitious employment generation schemes like "Assam Bikash Yojana" in order to provide financial assistance to local educated unemployed youths so that the youths could become self-sufficient and engage themselves in tourism promotional activities like transport, wayside amenities, food kiosk, restaurants, dhabas and cottages for accommodation, etc. The department also introduced training facilities for the drivers conducting jeep safaris within the National Parks.

Tourism, thus, can be considered as an important sector for economic development of Assam. For improvement of the impact of rural tourism as a perspective tool of rural development, some recommendations can be made in the following way-

- Proper planning of master plans needs to be prepared with specific objectives be integrated with Assam's overall economic and social development objective.
- Government intervention is necessary to enhance the contribution of tourism for socio-economic development and poverty reduction.
- Proper co-ordination and monitoring amongst various agencies and bodies of tourism.
- Private sector partnerships and public-private partnerships should be incorporated.
- Proper development of infrastructure, tourist facilities, enhancement of communication networks etc.
- Enhancement of the role of media in promoting tourism.
- State government should provide proper infrastructure for rural tourism in Assam.
- States to identify inter-state circuits for relaxing Restricted Area Permit(RAP) regime.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Tourism is an industry, which brings the world together, leads to enrichment of knowledge, exchange of culture and fosters international understanding. It is one of the largest industries in the world in terms of revenue and employment generation. Peoples all over the world are growing more interest to rural tourism or nature base tourism. The new approach of tourism can be a path to employment generation and economic development. Assam has a great potentiality for different growing segments of tourism like Eco-tourism, Cultural tourism, agro-tourism, religious tourism etc. So there is an urgent need to position Assam as an international branded tourist spot. If tourism is development through careful planning, it is sure to bring revolutionary transformation in its economy. So policy makers should adopt proper policies and implement them properly with the help of the general people for its development.

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