

TOURISM IN ASSAM- AILS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

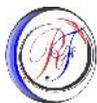
Assam has great potentiality for the tourism development. But, tourism has yet to be explored in Assam. The present paper highlights ails and opportunities of tourism in Assam.

Key words: Ecotourism, Sustainable tourism, Geotourism, Development.

PROLOGUE

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in India. The destinations and tourist sites which are scattered in different parts of North-East India in general and Assam in particular generally epitomized as natural tourism, cultural tourism, wildlife tourism, pilgrimage tourism, and medical tourism etc. With the rapid expansion of tourism activities, the concepts, contents and dimension of tourism have been changing rapidly viz. *Ecotourism*, *Sustainable tourism* and *Geotourism*. Environmentally responsible tourism or ecotourism is comparatively a new concept- which can be defined as travel to relatively undisturbed places for the purpose of enjoying natural surroundings. Ecotourism entails traveling to places that are renowned for their natural beauty and social culture, while making sure not to damage the ecological balance. Ecotourism tries to create a variety of quality tourism that is ecologically sustainable, economically, socially and psychologically acceptable. Again, *geotourism* always sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place-its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well being of its residents.

Assam is the land of varied exhilarating existing and potential tourist sites. And these sites are scattered in different location of the states. But, it is observed that the development and promotion of tourism in Assam is still in the infant stage. The existing tourist sites and products of states have also not been properly developing and maintaining for its long term sustainability. And, the potential tourist sites have also yet to be explored. Further, the awareness, education and involvement with tourism activities are yet very diminutive of Assamese people. Besides, socio-economic and political conditions of Assam in last 40 years are less conducive for development of tourism in Assam. Therefore, keeping in mind in the above view the present paper has been underscored.



OBJECTIVES

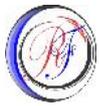
- i. To observe and examine the existing scenario of tourism in Assam.
- ii. To find out ails of tourism in Assam?
- iii. To recommend some steps for the future promotion and development of tourism in Assam.

DATABASE & METHODOLOGY

Both the primary and secondary data are used for the study. Primary data are collected from the field through standard questionnaires. Secondary data were collected from the published books, records, statistical profiles, reports, newspapers and magazines. Personal visit and interviews have been made to different tourist spots of the state in order to get exposure and experience.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

Assam has been always attracting many racial stocks for her natural resources and beauty. The Austro-Asiatic, Negritos, Dravidian, Alpines, Indo-Mongoloids, Tibetan-Burmese and Aryans penetrated into Assam through different routes and different times. And also they have contributed in their own way toward the unique fusion of a new community as we called it today as Assamese. The state was once covered with entire North-East and some part of the present Bengal and Bangladesh. The capital of this ancient kingdom was the present city Guwahati (earlier known as *Pragjyotishpur*) which was founded by the King Narakasur. The literature reveals that the first king who rules Kamrupa was Pushya Verman (350-380AD). He was followed by a numbers of rulers, but the well known was Kumer Bhaskar Verman (594-650AD). During his reign the famous Chinese scholar Hiuen Tsang (643AD) visited Kamrupa and wrote his travel account, which was known as *Si-Yu-Ki*. In his book *Si-Yu-Ki* Hiuen Tsang has mentioned in detailed about the physical, social, economic and political conditions of Assam during the time of his visit. He was the first foreign tourist who had visited Assam for the first time. After Barman Dynasty Assam was ruled by a numbers of rulers of many clans viz., Muslims, Chutia, Barbhuyans, Koch, Kachari, Jayantia etc came from different parts in different times. Particularly, with the advent of Muslims in about 1205AD, a new wave of migration has taken place to Assam. However, the King Sukapha, who came from Myanmar to Assam in the 13th century (1228AD), was the founder of famous Ahom dynasty in Assam. They were attracted by the beauty and resources of Assam and ruled over here about 600 years till 1826AD (*Yandabo Treaty*). In fact, Ahoms had changed the course of the history of Assam. They have created many portfolios i.e. *Borphan*, *Buragohain*, *Borpraguhain*, *Borbauah* etc. for their administrative purposes and also constructed many important buildings and monuments. After Yandabo Treaty, Assam was permanently came under the British rule. The Britishers had also been explored and exploited the resources and scenic beauties of Assam. In 1948 NEFA (North Eastern Frontier Agency) was created and also separated from Assam. In this way, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Mizoram were separated from greater Assam in 1963, 1972 and

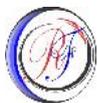


1987 respectively. However, during the period of *Yandabo Treaty* to till date many other groups of people viz., Nepali, Bengali and tea garden laborers came and settled in Assam permanently. In a nutshell, it may be said that from the time immemorial the land of blue hills and red rivers has been fascinating people of different walks of life by its aura of myths, mystery, music, mountains, and the beauty 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 attractions.

Assam is endowed with diverse tourist attractions with perfect destination for holidays and adventures. The twenty seven districts although full of tourist products and destinations have not been optimally utilized yet. The rolling hills, dense forests, green valleys, large waterways and rich bio-diversity make Assam one of the superb tourist destinations in the world. Being blessed by nature Assam has all the advantages to position itself as a perfect destination for all kinds of tourists. Assam has many advantages for the promotion and development of tourism as compared to other states of India. Yet for a variety of reasons this advantage has not brought for Assam the preeminent position that it deserves. It is therefore imperative to give a dynamic thrust to tourism promotion and to chart out bold, new directions to tourism growth. However, on the basis of existing and potential tourist products and destinations, Tourism of Assam may be broadly categorize as –

1. Nature Tourism (ecotourism, wildlife tourism etc)
2. Adventure Tourism
3. Pilgrimage Tourism
4. Cultural & Heritage Tourism
5. Tea Tourism
6. Medical Tourism
7. Sport Tourism
8. Geotourism
9. Rural Tourism and
10. MICE Tourism

Out of these ten categories of tourism mentioned above, the first four are partially developed in Assam and the rest are yet to be developed. It is to mention that there are about 80 (eighty) important existing and potential tourist destinations are scattered in different parts of Assam. However, the conditions of existing tourist destinations are not very encouraging. The management and maintenance of these destinations are meager in state. The infrastructural development of Assam was also very poor in state for the promotion and development in tourism in past decades. Therefore, the domestic and foreign visitors are not willing to visit these destinations with full enthuse. On the other hand, the Department of Tourism, Government of Assam is yet to fail to address the tourism as an important industry for the socio-economic development of Assam. As a result, the inflows of very limited tourists have been seen in Assam in the recent past decades. Of course, the socio-political circumstances of Assam in last few decades are not congenial for the healthy growth of



tourism in Assam. Particularly, varied student movements, ethnic violence, insurgence activities have been discouraging tourism in Assam. It is mentioned already that Assam has variety of tourist products and spots scattered in different locations. These products and the spots have been always providing immense scope for the tourism development of the state. Tourism cannot develop only with the availability of tourist sites and products. It needs a systematic and inclusive touch for its development. To develop tourism in any place, it is important to have some basic requirements as-

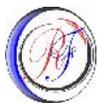
1. Enough information regarding tourist spots and products
2. Congenial socio-economic and political climate
3. Good Transport and Communication Network
4. Easy Accessibility
5. Comfortable Lodging
6. Hygienic and good food
7. Availability of civic amenities
8. Secured social environment
9. Standard banking and financial facilities and
10. Availability of tourist guide and cooperation of local people etc.

Of course, these are the minimum services needed to develop tourism in an area. Without these services and facilities tourism cannot be developed properly. As far as the tourism in Assam is concerned, it is observed that the facilities and services mentioned above are not found in up to the mark.

MAIN AILS

In short, a few main problems related to the tourism in Assam may be underlined as-

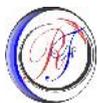
1. Awareness and publicity regarding tourism spots and sites is a major of problem of Assam tourism.
2. Infrastructures development is not up-to the mark in respect of all the existing and potential tourists' sites and products of the area is also another major ails of tourism in Assam.
3. Frequent insurgency and terrorism activities are another burning problems related to the tourism in Assam.
4. A comprehensive, short term and long term tourism policy for the Assam tourism is still lacking.
5. International star ranked hotels, lodges and restaurants are also still insufficient to cater the needs of the domestic and foreign visitors.
6. Well trained tourist guides are also not satisfactorily available.
7. The revolutionary participation of local people in all respect of tourism development is yet to be achieved satisfactorily.



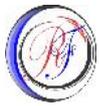
THE ROAD AHEAD

Tourism is a multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral activity and hence, it needs a holistic approach for its all round development. Some short-term and long term plans and policies are always helpful for the healthy growth of tourism in Assam. It is important to note that while making plans, programme and policies regarding the tourism development, it is very important to give utmost attention on the sustainability and long term benefits of the area and the people of the regions. At any condition, the originality and the genuineness of the products should not be compromised. The carrying capacity of the product is also taken into consideration in this regards. However, some important strategies can be adopted and implemented for the all round development of tourism in Assam near future are underlined below-

1. A wide range of long-term awareness and publicity drive in national and the international level can boost-up the tourism in Assam in right direction. The organizations of carnivals and festivals in different themes and seasons also can enhance the tourism in Assam. Attractive advertisements regarding the tourist spots and products in print and the electronic media should be published in regular basis. Besides, the local and national newspapers, the advertisement should be published in the reputed TV channels like Discovery, National Geographic and in The Fox Life and also other electronic and social networking media.
2. The development of infrastructures and provisions of comfortable civic amenities in and around the existing and potential tourist sites and products may give a new dimension to the tourism in state. Safe modes of transports and communication networks with adequate facilities are very essential for the same. The state government, Central government and the public business houses can take bold steps towards the development of tourism of Assam.
3. A stable and congenial social environment always encourages the tourism of an area. It has mentioned already that the society of Assam has been passed through a critical situation during the past three decades. However, very recently the peace and harmony has been slowly brought back to the region. Therefore, civil society has to take a pro-active role to restrain the peace & harmony of region. For that, a strong cultural wave may be started in the region. The intra-cultural festivals, drama shows, musical nights, theatre shows, arts, crafts and painting exhibition are some of the positive aspects to restore the culture and heritage of the region. A stable and perennial economic condition may help to solve the problem. Again, in this regards also tourism can help a lot.
4. As far as tourism policy is concerned, it should be inclusive in manner and sustainable in nature. In this regards, local intellectuals, scholars, active citizens have to sit together and find out the road map of the development.



5. About the accommodation and the food of the locality, it should be hygienic and health conscious. Some new hotels, lodges and restaurants have to be established by looking only the tourism perspectives. The state government and other financial organizations should always encourage and motivate the local youths towards the accommodation and food industry. Easy bank loans with maximum subsidy can attract the local youth in this line. Besides, before the establishment of any accommodation and food industry, it is very important to have some practical knowledge about the same. So, government has to take financial and other support in this regards also. Local entrepreneurs should provides the opportunities to visit the state like Sikkim, Kerala, Rajasthan, Odissa, Maharashtra etc to get the first hand knowledge about the tourism sectors.
6. Good toilets services and other essential services are immediately to be introduced in different tourist locations. Well maintained pay and use toilet system can be introduced immediately. Further, this services needs to have regular monitoring system by the concerning authorities to maintain its standard. Reward and punishment can be introduced for taking step to encourage this system.
7. Tourism is now one of the biggest growing industries in the world. Millions of people are engaged in tourism and related services worldwide. However, for the proper guidance and the presentation of tourist products and spots, well trained tourist guide is essential. It is mentioned above that well trained tourist guide is not sufficient in Assam. So, to get rid of this problem it is suggested that an institution should establish exclusively dedicated to the tourism in Assam. It is also suggested that the curriculum of the course of content in the institution should be based on local tourist spots and products. Besides, theoretical knowledge, the authority of the institution should give maximum interest on the practical and field visit method of study. Both, long and short term courses may be introduced here.
8. To solve the transportation and its related services, the districts transport authorities should give special attention to solve and maintain the same. It is suggested that some private and public transport services may be introduced which are exclusively engaged for the tourism related matters only. Both AC and non AC vehicles with well condition should be allowed to operate the network. Besides, the drivers of the vehicles should be gentle in behavior and manner. They should also give proper training regarding the different local and international languages. The fluency particularly, of Hindi and English is very urgent for them.
9. Tourists whether national and the international in nature always like to purchase some items in their own choice. It is learnt that visitors generally wish to carry the art, artifacts, showpieces, traditional dresses, durable food items, herbal medicines etc to



their own home. Therefore, local business houses and businessman should established specialized shops and markets bases on the local resources and materials. In this respects, it may be suggested to establish the business related to the products of tea plant and leafs, coconuts, jute items, medicinal herbs, traditional pickles, wood and bamboo crafts, pottery and clay items etc.

10. Above all, without the wholehearted participation of local people in the tourism sectors, it is very difficult to boost-up the tourism industry in any region. Therefore, public awareness and participation is the backbone of the growth and development of tourism industry in Assam. Hence, Department of Tourism, print and media houses, local educational institutions, intellectuals, entrepreneurs and business houses should work together in a good co-coordinative manner to make Assam as a hot tourist destination of the world.

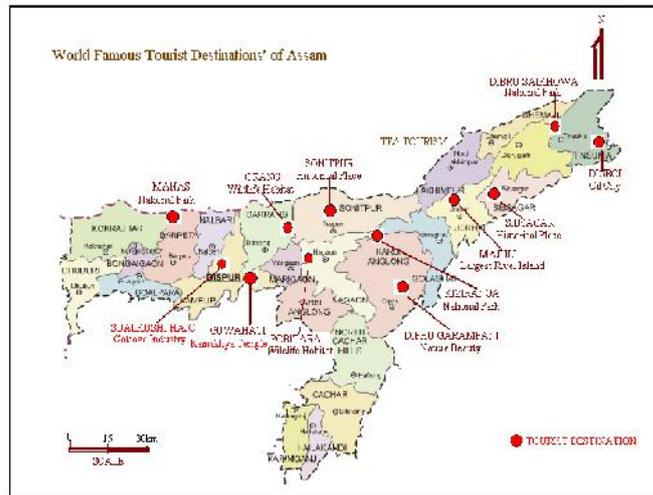
EPILOGUE

Assam tourism has also been growing slowly in spite of its many problems. Tourism in Assam is based mainly on its ample natural resources, scenic beauty, unique flora, fauna, lush tea gardens, historical monuments, holy shrines, ethnic & colorful diversity, fairs and festivals etc. However, tourism in Assam can be developed based on the concept of ecotourism and geotourism. The ecotourism and the geotourism products of the state needs immediate identification and should have taken utmost interest to restore and develop for attractive tourist destination. The problems which have been mentioned above may be solved by the cooperation and help of public, private and NGOs sectors.

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Famous architectural monument of Ahom Dynasty **Ranghar** at Sibsagar



Popular Mask making of world famous Majuli River Island. (*Photograph: K. Kalita)