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Whether Northeast India wishes to exploit its Tourism Potential? Some doubts

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Abstract

Northeast India is one hot spot for tourist destinations due to its endowed rich natural resources and culture. It very sad, that tourism is in NE India, yet to get due attention from the policy maker. Deficiencies are from many angles. The paper highlights tourist destinations in the region, along with the problems, tactics, and recommendations for the tourism industries to explore and grow in the region. This paper explores tourism and its economic significance. Although the initiative has been taken up by the Government of India to uplift the sector, the sector is underperforming which is mainly due to lack of promotion and marketing effort, poor infrastructure, barrier in transportation, and lack of proper collaboration between the public and private sector. This paper seeks to highlight the road maps of tourism in the northeast region as tourist destinations. Finally, a few recommendations along with the deficiencies have been highlighted to transform the region into a tourist hot spot.

Keywords: Constructed Environment, Tourism Innovation, Destinations, Strategies

1. Introduction

Tourism is a social activity that entails people from one part of the world to the other part of the world (UNWTO, 2008). Today, every country is looking at the sector as the major factor for growth and development. It is one of the fastest-growing sectors, with the objectives of generating foreign revenue, employment, domestic product, and income. According to Shukla and Beejata, tourism is an important socio-economic activity (Das, 2013). Having said it as a socio-economic activity, northeast India has a good prospect for the sector to grow with its rich natural resource and cultural traditions that can attract tourist from every corner of the world. Although the region covers only 8% of the country, it is strategically located by sharing its border internationally with a country like Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal. Both domestic and foreign tourist visits the region to explore the natural site and culture. It is to be noted that the sector involved many stakeholders or organizations that are involved directly or indirectly in the industries. The sector account about 10% of employee and are considered as one of the fastest-growing industries sectors. 100% FDI has been granted in the sector by the Government of India. The paper will highlight the various tourism destinations in the region; propose strategies for the growth of the sector, and the problem faced by the sector along with an appropriate suggestion.

Objectives

1. To explore the various tourism destination in Northeast India
2. To find out various tactics for the growth of tourism in Northeast India
3. To highlight the problems and suggest an appropriate solution for tourism in Northeast India

Methodology

The study is purely base on secondary data obtained from various published sources such as journals, newspapers, reports, magazines, and various other website publications. The study is descriptive in nature.

2. Literature Review

The tourism industries are one of the fastest-growing industries in the world. Although many research works have been carried out, the region is still lacking behind as compared to other parts of the country. Having said this, the region needs to improve the sector, and this can be carried out through research and development. The following are some of the literature which has contributed to the study of tourism in the regions:

Praveen and Asokan (2013), in their study, find out that tourism in northeast India is developing, but not as expected as compared to other parts of India. The study reveals that the maximum inflow of tourists is Assam. Sikkim, due to its small population and areas, the impact of tourist inflow is highest.

Chutia (2015), in his paper highlights that tourists visit places for the scenic beauty of nature, taste a variety of food, a culture of the people, adventures, peace of mind, and architecture appreciation. The study defines tourism as multi-dimensional activities and further states that Assam although it is richly endowed with natural resources, due to lack of good tourist-attracting spot, the region cannot attract tourists.

Dayananda and Leelavathi (2016) conducted the study in analysing and implementing tourism policy. The study further finds that there exists a close relationship between tourism development and tourism policy. The Government of India has initiated to improve the infrastructure for the development of tourism, and adopted strategies such Public-Private-Partnerships (PPP). This then results in increase tourist inflow, employment, and revenue.

Goutam (2018), in his paper, suggested the Indian Government continue the adoption of policies in tourist's favor by allowing a new visa regime, enable investment in vital infrastructure, and ease the companies in doing business. The Government of India needs to take the advantage of diverse tourism destinations by forming the right policies, which will improve the ranking of its tourism industries.

Purabi (2017), in his research work, has highlighted tourism industries in Assam and the sector that can contribute to economic development. The study points out that the employment creation by the sector is not satisfactory, along with the revenue generation from both foreign and domestic tourists. Various challenges for the growth of tourism in the state are to be overcome, to developed tourism in the state. Corporations between the public, private, and NGOs are needed to develop the concept of eco-tourism, and the identification of geo-tourism products.

Barman (2012) in his work forwarded an integrative model connecting sustainability as well innovation of tourism product through his seminal paper entitled "Atithi Devo Bhava: In Search of Ways for Tourism Innovation in North East India". It is one among the most innovative model in the context of North East Indian tourism and regional innovation.

From the review, here we found the extreme gap of work questioning deficiency of efforts of tourism development. This gaps motivate the authors to ask the "whether east India wishes to exploit its tourism potential?". Getting answer to this question this is only a humble attempt.

3. Tourism in Northeast India

The Northeast region is one of the hot spots for the tourist to reach. The region is rich in natural resources, such as fauna and flora, natural heritage sites. Many endanger species such as One-Horned Rhino, Sangai deer, Shiroi lily, Red Panda, etc are some of the species which attract tourist from every corner of the world. Another important aspect of the region is its geographical location. The region shared its border with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China Myanmar, and Nepal. This makes the region to be prospective for tourism industries. Another important aspect is the rich culture. The region is home to many indigenous tribes, although the region, although the region accounts for only 8% of the total country areas. And each part of the region has an array of fascinating festivals, traditions, and ethnography. Besides having spectacular biodiversity, wildlife, snow-capped Himalayas, tropical forests, shrines of diverse religions, and prominent archaeological sites, the region provides an immense opportunity for medical tourism. Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal depend on India for health a service, which is mainly caused by cost-effectiveness. Guwahati city, top in medical tourism, due to its language advantage, cost-effectiveness, geographical location, and transport facilities (De, 2017; Nath, 2019). Adventure tourism; safari in Kaziranga in Assam, trekking in Dziikuo valley, Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh, and Living root bridge in Meghalaya are some of the tourist-attracting spot found in the region. Business tourism is another fast-growing sector, with look east policy and India's Vision 2020 the region is projected to be one of the prospective areas. Due to its rich natural resources and diverse culture with many ethnic tribes, tourism can be viewed in different ways or other words; tourism has huge potential and scope for socio-economic development in the region (Prasain, 2017).

3.1 Tourist Destination in Northeast India

The region has a significantly large tourist destination as compared to its size. Some of the important spots relate to culture, adventure, religion, nature, education, medical, and sports. Some of the famous tourist destinations are as followed

National Park: Kanchendzonga National Park, Kaziranga National Park, Manas National Park, Balphakram National Park, Namdapha National Park, Keibul Lamjao National Park, Shirui National Park, Phawngpui National Park, and Ntangki National Park.

Medical: Guwahati can be considered a healthy city. Currently tourists both domestic and foreign visit Guwahati for getting medical support. The geographical locations, ease of access, good technology, and skills, cost-effectiveness, has brought the city to the notice of its neighbouring countries and are expected to draw tourists from ASEAN countries.

Pilgrimage Destination: Kamakhya Devi Temple, Bhuvaneswari Temple, Sri Surya Pahar, Tripura Sundari Temple, Sri Govindajee Temple, Hajo Powa Mecca, Tawang Monastery, Rumtek Monastery, Bomdila Monastery, and Samdruptse Hill.

Heritage: Sibsagar, Majuli Island, Ujjayanta Palace, Apatani Cultural landscape, Tsomgo Lake, Mawsynram, Loktak Lake, Dawki River, and Kangla Fort.

Cultural: Sangai Festival, Shirui Festival, Hornbill Festival, Bihu Festival, Myoko Festival, Wangala Festival, Torgya Festival, Chapchar Kut, Losar, Losoong, and Ambubachi Mela.

Hills Stations: Gangtok, Pelling, Shillong, Tawang, Cherrapunjee, Kurseong, Kurseong, Ziro, Jowai, Mawsynram, and Bomdila.

These are some of the important spots which are currently attracted by the tourist. It is to be noted that there are many more tourist destinations that are yet to be explored. The government and many other organizations are working hand in hand to explored and registered new tourist destinations in the region.

3.2 Tourism Policy in India

Tourism is one of the most important and famous human activities and helps in the growth of socio-economic conditions. Tourism and tourism policy are interrelated. Policies are made and initiated by the government of India to attract more tourists by improving the infrastructure, facilities, service and handling the tourism event by collaborating with the private organization. The first tourism policy was set up in the year 1982 to promote sustainable tourism as a means for economic growth, brand building to attract foreign tourists, and social integration. Following, the planning committee gives special preference to tourism in every five-year plan until 2015, as it was replaced by NITI Aayog, however, the importance given to the sector is not compromised in the transformation. Since then the sector has been improving and growing rapidly (D.S.Leelavathi, 2016).

Currently, Assam Government has taken up development of the sector by promoting tourism through campaigning, building a global brand such as “Awesome Assam” to attract both domestic and international tourism, adopting Information Communication Technology (ICT) in Tourism Sector. Meghalaya State Government has come up with the policies of creating effective marketing strategies to make the sector unique and preferred destinations. Similarly, other states in the region have taken up steps like community ownerships in Arunachal Pradesh, creation of job opportunity, and preservation of culture in Manipur, while a state like Sikkim has been working out to promote as an organic state. Nagaland government on the other hand has come up with the projection of 20 years plan for developing sustainable tourism. It can be noted that the Government of India as well as the local government bodies and stockholders are working to developed tourism in the region.

4. Economic Significance

The World Travel and Tourism calculated that the GDP contribution of the section is \$8.8 trillion (equating to 10.4 of global GDP) in 2018. It is also noted that about 78.5% of the total revenue is coming from the leisure market, as compared to 21.5 % from business spending. Globally China is dominating with 25% in GDP contribution, followed by the USA 12% and India at 6% with a growth rate of 6.7%. This gave India 3rd place in the contribution of global GDP growth, 2018. In terms of investment, India is 3rd largest capital investment in the sector. The sector supports about 319 million, which account for 10% of job worldwide. It is forecasted that by 2029, India alone will support 10 million jobs securing 2nd position worldwide (Council, 2019). The northeast region is performing well in the sector, with it rich with nature and culture. Assam state top for most tourist visitors and followed by Meghalaya for the year 2018-2019 (Mint, 2021). The region has shown significant growth of 5.2 percent in the year 2017 and is expected to double in the following year (Singh, 2017). Each state has its tourism policy, which not only focuses on the growth of tourism, but to provide employment, generation of foreign revenue, infrastructure development, conserves culture and arts, and lastly contribute to sustainable development. The growth of the sector will not only limit generating foreign revenue but also bring development in the region by improving the infrastructure, technology, and accessing better service to the region. Many countries have taken up the policy to boost the industries by improving road and transport service, Infrastructure, Telecommunication, Banking service, Hotels, Hospital, Pubs, etc which will ultimately not only make the tourist happy but the local too.

5. Problems

Tourism industries are one of the volatile industries, and even though policies are made to make the industries grow, there are unavoidable problems, which are creating a hurdle for its growth in the region.

1. At present, the region has a poor marketing platform for exploring the tourism industries. Currently, the region has not been explored by its neighbouring states and countries, which make the industry, grow at a much slower pace than expected.
2. Another challenge in the region is the lack of proper transport facilities and infrastructure issues. The region needs to focus more in the development of facilities such as transportation, telecommunication, hospital services, banking, accommodation, and hygienic hotel and restaurant, are some of the important key aspects that need to improve.
3. Untimely sanctions of funds from the government body delay the completion of the project.
4. The tourism policies in the region by and large do not have marketing strategies to promote and pull tourists.
5. Development in the region is not coherent and political imperatives intervene to slow down any progress in construction and improvement of infrastructure. Despite many development programs proposed by the government, it has been barely taking root.
6. Travel restriction and security are the major social problem that has been prevailing in the region, unlinked any other part of the country. ILP, Restricted Area Permit, and insurgencies are the major problem, which the region need to considered and minimized.
7. Lack of proper experience in planning and organizing tourism activities slow the pace of tourism's progress in the region.

With the minimum facilities and infrastructure, the region is exposed globally. It is to be noted that the perception of policymakers, stakeholders, and common people towards tourism needs to be clear and understand the highlighted problems.

6. Initiatives & Tactics

Despite all the problems as highlighted, certain strategies can be initiated to make the sector healthy in the region. With its rich natural resources and potential, the sector can grow by the involvement of government, NGOs, people, and stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of strategies. An integrated Tourism innovation project and tourism design can fetch to initiative for holistic innovation in North East India (Barman, 2013).

Some of the strategies are highlighted as follows:

6.1 Through Constructed Environment

We can appreciate the construction initiative taken by the government of India and state government, that in Assam constructed river bridges such as Dhola Sadia (2017), Bogibeel Bridges on Brahmaputra (2018), Kalia Bhumora Setu (1987), Dibong River Bridges (2013) and etc (*Wikipedia*). Construction of bridges and dams, and temples are no doubt fall under the ambit of constructed environment for tourism. However, we refer constructed environment for tourism by extending the scopes under wider interpretation. Construction here refers to the man-made thing for the tourist for providing accommodation, leisure time, comfort, and satisfaction. As the ultimate result of tourism industries is to satisfy the tourist, competence in construction is essential. Tourism industries cannot compromise competence infrastructure and environment. The existence of good accommodation and service facilities are essential, and at present, the region is far lacking behind. There is a less 5-star hotel in the region and much other unregistered accommodation is existed, which do not meet the basic prerequisite of tourist. This can be overcome by the government by making policy and if possible monitoring the quality and service provided by the inns and lodging. An increase in tourist inflow seeks a well-trained and expert in the areas of the hospital, banking and proper tour guide. A good plan construction of simple road or building can be tourist-attracting sight. The region has a good network of railway lines and river channels, which can be used as a mode of travel. Ecotourism can be explored in the region if there are proper road and loading facilities. Airport service can be used as a platform to promote tourism by advertising and if possible collaborating in giving special tour package. Banking and telecommunication need to be improved to make the tourist convenient in doing electronic transaction instead of cash mode of payment.

6.2 Developing through Education

Other important tactics to improve tourism in the region are by educating and management of the local/regional people mind-set. Once the tourist land at the spot the tourist will evaluate and examine with the perception of past other tour experience and expectation. Any bad experience and impolite behaviour will stimulate negative perception. It is the biggest challenge to educate, and this can be done by making the community take part in the industries but before some training and development. Although the region people are decent, hospitable by nature, the tourist may be coming from other parts of the country that is more hospitable and cultured like Thailand, Japan, and South Korea. The education sector needs to be given special attention to the sector, to educate the commons people to understand the importance of tourism.

6.3 Developing Through Tourism Product Promotion

Another important aspect for the growth of tourism in the region is the lack of proper tourism product promotion in the region. The creation of new tourist spots with proper infrastructure is essential. At present, the region is not paying much attention to the growth and development of different types of tourism like the resort, park, pub, eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and proper environment for nightlife. A slogan such as "Incredible India" helps in promoting the event on a wider scale in the region. All entire regions should work out promoting the tourism event rather than promoting only indigenous tourist events. Brand building is another major the region needs to emphasize. The government and various other organizations should encourage the conservation of ethnic culture and traditions. These can be achieved by promoting it and providing a platform for the event to conduct an encounter with the tourist. Most of the tourist developed country has a strong collaboration with the private; the northeast region of the country has to build a strong relationship with the private sector. A good plan and execution of the industries will help in generating revenue, create the job, and help in uplifting the economic condition in the region. Promoting the cultural tourism and community empowerment a full range of digital integration is also can be good project (Barman. 2010). For tourism product development Barman (2013) suggested through his hybrid model for tourism excellence for tourism product promotion.

8. Few Recommendations: Some recommendation can be put as follows:

1. Tourism in the region can be developed by properly educating the local people and proper tourist guides.
2. Promoting the tourism product to other countries, neighbouring states, and through various mass media or social media.
3. For tourism product promotion and innovation the sustainability issues need to integrate to attract the global connection as stated in the model of Barman (2013).
4. Improving the infrastructure facilities, and replacing old/ out dated technology with new technology.
5. Collaboration between the public-private while planning, and making policies.
6. Removal of restriction and barrier in interstate transport.
7. The concept of sustainable tourism needs to encourage and promote.

9. Conclusion

Policies made by the government are not up to the standard to uplift this sector. May be, it would be cryptic comment that “the missions of the policy of tourism development goes somewhere, and the practice development moves to somewhere. Tourism development and related policies are not at all aligned to real development” (Barman, 2021). We doubt, whether the North East India attempts to exploit it potential, the policy makers exploit policy opportunity for not to develop the tourism sector in the region. Although policies are made, only a few of the policies are implemented, while others are idle in the form of paperwork only. There exist no relation between planning and policies making to make the sector well organized and to uplift. Therefore serious research is essential to make the policies to be more pragmatic. It is to be noted that the level of research demand for the growth of the industries is not encouraged by the government body. Although it has been brought to the notice through publications, no step has been initiated from the government.

With this brief note, the paper accomplished highlights the problems and suggestion in fresh highlighting the problems, articulation some suggestions for development. The paper has forwarded suggestive tactics for the growth of tourism in northeast India. The present study concludes that tourism if plan well can be a good source of revenue and employment generation in future. But, development of tourism in the region needs more strategic formulation of tourism development policies and educations. The sector encourages the conservation of the culture and traditions of many ethnic tribes. Strategies such as educating the local people, promoting tourism products, and building a competence structure can be adapted to cover the various challenges and problems as highlighted in the above studies. Government and private cooperation need the hour.

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