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Heritage And Cultural Tourism In North East India By Exploring Historical Valued Destinations

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Abstract

North East India comprises eight small states Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim (became a part of this region in 2002), and Tripura. Right from the early times, despite its secluded geographical location, people from dissimilar ethnic stocks with diverse socio–cultural backgrounds came from different directions at various stages and established their settlement areas. The region served as a corridor where migrants from Tibet, South-East Asia, China, and the Indian sub-continent arrived at made their permanent abode. At the same time, almost all the religions of Northern India passed through this region to spread them in South East Asia and China. The region also witnessed one of the most significant battles that shaped the course of World War II i.e., the Imphal-Kohima Battle. The region can also boast of having Majuli, the largest river island in the world, The cleanest village in Asia, the INA War Memorial only of its kind in India, and the Japanese War Memorial at Red Hill- the only of its kind in mainland Asia. So, the rich history of the region and its cultural diversity make its national and international tourism appeal large and diverse. It represents heritage and cultural tourism along with other aspects of tourism in the region. So, the region despite many drawbacks has a large tourist potential for heritage and cultural tourism by exploring historically valued destinations.

Introduction:

North East India comprises of eight small states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim (becomes a part of this region in 2002) and Tripura. Right from the early times, in spite of its secluded geographical location, people from dissimilar ethnic stocks with diverse socio – cultural backgrounds came from different direction at various stages and established their settlement areas. The region served as a corridor where migrants from Tibet, South- East Asia and China, and Indian subcontinent arrived at the made their permanent abode.¹ At the same time, almost all the religion of the Northern India passed through this region to spread them in South East Asia and China. ² The region also witnessed one of the most significant battles which shaped the course of the World War II i.e., the Imphal-Kohima Battle. So, the rich history of the region and its cultural diversity make its national and international tourism appeal large and diverse. It represents heritage and cultural tourism along with other aspects of tourism in the region.

Exploring Historical Valued Destinations of North East India:

Tawang:³

Tawang is both historically and naturally endowed. It is located at a distance of 183 km. from Bomdila. Tawang Monastery which is an important seat of Mahayana Buddhism is located here. This world-famous monastery of the Gelukpa sect was founded during the 17th century by Mera Lama Lodre Gyastso by the wishes of the 5th Dalai Lama Nagwang Lobsang Gyatso.

The name Tawang means 'Horse chosen'. Its name(ta=horse and wang=chosen) is the subject of an interesting legend. As the story goes, the site of the monastery was chosen by the horse of Mura Lama who had been unable to decide on a site to establish the monastery. One day he was praying in cave seeking divine guidance. When he came out after the prayers, he found his horse missing. On searching, the horse was located standing quickly on a hilltop. Considering this a sign of divine blessing, he decided to construct the monastery at the very spot. The monastery was built with the help of volunteers from the neighbouring villages. It is also known by a Tibetan name Golden Namgrey Lhatse which means 'Celestial Paradise in a clear night'.

The historical importance of Tawang Monastry is that it is the second largest monastery in the world after the Porombudur Monastrery of Java, Indonesia. At the same time, Parkhang Library of the monastery has a collection of 400-year-old Kangyur scriptures in addition to many other invaluable manuscripts which regarded as sacred books by the Buddhists. It also has the 8.3 m high golden statue of Shkyamuni Buddha.

Another historical importance and attraction for tourists of Twang are the Urgyelling Monastery which is considered sacred as it is the birthplace of Thangyang Gyatsa, the sixth Dalai Lama. Tawang is also closely related to the present Dalai Lama.

When the 14th i.e., the present Dalail Lama fled from Tibet, following the failure of a rebellion against the Chinese central government, he crossed into India on 30 March 1959 and spent some days resting at Tawang Monastery before reaching Tezpur in Assam on 18th April 1959. Since then, he has visited Tawang many times. He visited Tawang on 8th November 2009 and gave a religious discourse which was attended by about 30,000 people including those from neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bhutan.

Pasuram Kund:⁴

Pasuram Kund is located 13 miles north-east of Tezu town, District Headquaters of Lohit District, Arunachal Pradesh. Among the various sacred water places, people take a dip at Pasuram Kund on River Rohit in Tezu which is the most popular. The mythology associated with the Pasuram kund goes as per Kalika Purana that Pasuram, the great sage washed way the sin of slaying his mother by bathing in the waters of Brahma kund. Probably that could have earned another name for the sacred waters as 'Pasuram Kund'. Thousands are said to flock the Pasuram kund to take a holy dip on Makar Sankaranti Mela which falls in the middle of January every year.

Jairampur:5

Jairampur is the headquater of Jairampur sub-division of Changlang District, Arunachal Pradesh. This place becomes an important area after discovering a World War II Cemetery inside thick jungles of the bank of Namchik River, 6 km. from Jairampur. The Cemetery is about 1,000 graves of allied soldiers believed to be mostly of Chinese, Kachins, Indian, British and American soldiers who died in the second world war, and its area is about three acres. The discovery of this cemetery has led to renewed interest in the famous Still Well Road built by Allied forces linking Ledo in Assam to Kumming in China. The historical importance of this road was that during the World War II, Japan occupied Burma in early part of 1942. The British troops retreated to Assam. The Japanese cut-off road communication to China and isolated it. The Japanese were moving towards the North to invade China. With a view to recover Burma by the British and the defense of China and maintaining the supply line to the Chinese Nationalist Forces of General Issimo Chiang Kaishek, a joint command, namely South East Asiatic command with British, America and China were hurriedly formed in Assam under the Supreme Command of Admiral Lord Luis Mountbetton with his headquarters at Singapore and General Joseph W. Stilwell (U.S.) as Deputy Supreme Commander. General Chiang Kaishek prompted General Stilwell to plan a road from Ledo Railhead in Assam to Kunming, Yunan Province of China. Thus, a road was planned in February, 1942. The Road was originally named Ledo Road. After its formal completion of construction on 20 May 1945, it was renamed the Stilwell Road in honour of General Joseph W.Stilwell at the suggestion of General Chiang Kaishek.

Champhai-Rih Dil/Rih Lake:⁶

Champhai is a commercial town located near the Myanmar border, 194 Km from Aizawl, Mizoram. Within a few kilometers away from here, are some villages of historical significance, where the age-old Mizo way of life, is still preserved. The historical places in the vicinity of Champhai include Rih-Dil-the legendary lake located 5 km within Myanmar which is associated with the Mizo Animist religion of yore.

"Rih Dil is the largest lake in Mizoram, but is situated in Burma", goes the common saying. This is an awkward claim to make, but it is a fact due to arbitrary political boundaries. Rih Lake is situated 14 miles Champhai and 63 miles from Falam, a town in Myanmar. The lake is approximately one mile long and half a mile wide with a circumference of about three miles and a depth is about 60 feet. Rih Lake is well known for its heart-like shape.

The legendary lake is believed to have been the inevitable passage that spirit of the dead crossed on their way to their future above known as Mithi Khua. Some even believed it was the final above of the spirits. The many myths about this mysterious lake have been a source of inspiration for several Mizo writers and composers. It also lures the visitors to explore the mysterious and supposedly demon-haunted lake.

Khonoma Village :7

Khonoma village is situated at the top of a hill 20 km west of Kohima, Nagaland. Many research scholars have passed this village looking for a piece of the past. The village still has some of the best preserved Morungs and monoliths. The historical importance of this village is that it was here that the Naga warriors made their last stand against the British in 1879.

The Peak of the village's hill is the memorial site for British Political Officer GH Damant, who first came to Khonoma in 1879 A.D. He and his army were warned not to enter Khonoma by neighbouring villages, but the political officer was adamant and decided to proceed with his guards. His courage was in guns and he thought that they were ready fight off any attack by who they called ` the savages `. Damant was killed on 4th October, 1879 which led to a long war with the British who tried to control the village. On 22nd November, 1879 the biggest battle was fought between them resulting in the killing of three British Officers, namely Major C.R. Cock, Sub. Major Nurbir Sai and LT. H.H. Furbes. Khonoma village, during that time was one of the biggest villages and they fought four times with the British. In 1880, a peace treaty was signed between the British and Khonoma. The most remarkable about this fighting between the British and Khonoma was that a Poor Naga village could fight off the British subjugation with nothing but spears and knifes. In this battle the villagers got hold of a gun and it is still exhibited at one of the morungs in the village.

So many research scholars and visitors have come to this village looking for a piece of the past.

Kohima War Cemetery:⁸

The Kohima War Cemetery was constructed in memory of the officer and men of Allied soldiers who made supreme sacrifices during the Japanese invasion during the World War II. The site used to be the Tennis Court of the Deputy Commissioner and one of the fiercest battles was fought here before Kohima was captured from the Japanese. The Battle of Kohima had lasted for nearly three months between April 4th and June 22nd 1944, and these brave hearts fighting for the Allied forces had admirably blocked the Japanese invasion right at the border of India. This battle along with the Battle of Imphal is chosen as Britains's greatest battle, recently, in a contest organized by the National Army Museum, London. The historical importance of this battle is that his battle was the scene of perhaps the bitterest fighting of the whole Burma campaign when a small commonwealth force held out against repeated attack by a Japanese Division. The fiercest hand to hand fighting took place in the garden of the Deputy Commissioner's bunglow, around tennis court i.e., when on 18th April the relief forces of the British 2nd Division arrived; the defensive parameter was reduced to a shellshattered area only 350 metre squares. In compare to the battle of Imphal (March-July), the Battle of Kohima was smaller in scale shorter i.e., from April to June, but the fighting was so intense that it has been described as the 'Stalingrad of the East'. Approximately 13,000 Japanese soldiers battled against a 9,000 strong Allied Forces led by General Slim, and roughly 3000 Japanese and 4,000 British casualties were counted at the end of it. The Battle of Kohima along with the Battle of Imphal ranked with Midway, EL Almein and Stalingrad as the main turning point battles of the World War II. Another importance of this cemetery is the renowned Epitaph carved on each grave, which writes, "When You Go Home, Tell Them of Us and Say, For Their Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today".¹³

Kong Thong :9

Call it a unique caller id. In this remote village of East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, the inhabitants go not by their names but by their own individual calling tunes. Its historical and cultural importance is that believe it or not, the small tribe of this village still uses unusual sounds and musical tunes to talk to each other, since the early period. Not that these people do not have a language of their own-they belong to the Khasi tribe and speak the language – but they simply prefer to communicate with each other musically to experience this unique practice to visit to Khonthong in Khatar shnong (meaning 12 villages).

Mawlynnong :10

Nested among tall betel nut trees, 90 kms. from Shillong, along the Indo-Bangladesh border is 'God's Own Garden" – Mawlynnong. This village is also described as "A magical land where time stands still." Travel magazine Discover India declared the village as the cleanest in Asia in 2003, and the cleanest in India in 2005. Village is more related to eco-tourism and village-based tourism than historical and cultural destination. Its only historical and cultural value maintained by this village is that a 500-year-old living root bridge that wasn't built but grown.

Gurudongmar Lake :¹¹

Situated at a height of 17,000ft, in North Sikkim, it is considered as the most sacred lake by the Buddhist and Hindus alike. The beautiful and awe-inspiring lake (190 kms from Gangtok) remains milky in colour throughout the year. According to a legend, since the lake used to remain frozen most of the year, it was not possible to use its water for drinking purposes. Guru Nanak Dev, founder of Sikhism religion, during his trip to Tibet visited many of the places where Padmasambhava (the Indian tantric Buddhist who conducted rituals here) prayed at including this lake in North Sikkim. At the local people's request for water, Guru Nanak, with his dang (a long stick) broke upper layer of ice and said, "water of this lake will never freeze. Whosoever takes the water of this lake will gain virility and strength and will bless with children." The people of the area have firm faith in Guru's words and consider the water of the lake as nectar. Thus, the water of the lake is said to have curative properties and many tourists carry the water from this lake on their way back.

Rumtek Monastery:¹²

Rumtek Monastery longed considered an exceptionally holy place by the Tibetan Buddhist, is at 24 km from Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. Originally, it was built by the 9th Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje in 16th Century, at the same time as Phodong Monastery and Ralang Monastry, Rumtek served as the main seat of the Karma Kagyu lineage in Sikkim.

The historical and cultural importance of Rumtek Monastery is that when the communists began to occupy Tibet during the 1950s, the 16th Karmapa realised that he would have to leave the country to preserve the accumulated spiritual legacy of the Karma Kagyu. During the 1959 uprising, he left Tsurphu Monastery with a group of 150 tulkus, lamas, monks and lay followers. Carrying spiritual treasures, relics, and texts that had been collected at Tsurphu for 700 years, they made the long and difficult journey to India through Bhutan. On reaching the Indian border town of Buxa Daur, the Karmapa received an invitation from his majesty Chongyal Tashi Namgyal, the King of Sikkim (Sikkim became a part of India in 1975), to establish a new seat in that country. The Karmapa accepted; with the generosity and help of the Sikkim royal family and Indian government, he rebuilt Rumtek Monastery. After four years, construction of the monastery was completed. The sacred items and relics brought out from Tsurphu Monastery, the Karmapa's seat in Tibet, were installed. On Tibetan new year day (Losar) in 1966, the 16th Karmapa officially inaugurated the new seat called, `` The Dharmachakra Centre – a place of erudition and spiritual accomplishment, the seat of the glorious Karmapa''.

The monastery is currently third largest in the world. It is home to the community of monks and where they perform the rituals and practices of the Karma lineage.

Unakoti, Kailasahar :¹³

Unakoti means one less than a crore. About 186 kms from Agartala, Unakoti is an important site of archaeological wonder. It is Shiva pilgrimage attraction and dates back to $7^{th} - 9^{th}$ centuries A.D. The site consists of several huge vertical rock-cut carving on a hillside consists of several huge vertical rock-cut carving on a hillside.

Doarmora Village:¹⁴

Doarmora village is a village inhabited by the Sinspho which is situated in Tinsukia District of Assam. The Historical importance of this village is that the discovery of Indian tea started from this village when the indigenous preparation of tea was discovered by a Scottish soldier, Robert Bruce in 1823 (Tea Industry in Assam) during the Anglo-Burmese War of 1826. He came to know about the existence of tea after he was given a concoction of the beverage by the Singpho King Bisa Gam.

Singpho villages of Margherita area, Deormora village attracted those tourists who love /interest in the history of tea or those tourists who love to taste indigenous flavor of tea. The recent two days N.E. Festival held on 8 and 9 November, 2013 in New Delhi attracted organic Singpho tea.

Hajo :¹⁴

Hajo is located 32 km from Gauhati, on the bank of river Brahmaputra. It is a place where three religions meet i.e., Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. It is known that the temple was constructed by King Raghu Deva Narayan in 1583.

According to some other historians, king of Pala dynasty constructed it in 6th century. It is a stone temple and it enshrines an image of Hayagriva Madhav. The image of Vishnu installed at the temple resembles that of Jaganath at Puri, in Oririsa. A curious feature of this temple, is that as a Buddhist shrine by Buddhist Lamas and Butiyas who profess Buddhism. The rows of elephants are seen on the body of the temple and they are fine specimens of Assamese art.

Another interesting fact about Hajo is that side by side with the Madhav Temple, there is a celebrated Muslim shrine popularly known as 'Poa Mecca'. The faithful gain one fourth of the spiritual enlightenment of what could lbe gained at Mecca ('Poa' means one-fourth).

Saraighat War Memorial Park :¹⁵

This Park is at Agyathuri on the northern bank of river Brahmaputra. The Park has been constructed for preservation and promotion of the memories associated with the Battle of Saraighat which took place in the year 1671 A.D. between the Mughal empire, led by the Kachwaha King ,Raja Ram Singh I and the Ahom kingdom, led by Lachit Borphukan. The Battle of Saraighat was the last battle in the last major attempt by the Mughal to extend their empire into Assam. The Historical significance of this Battle is that although much weaker both in military personnel and weapons, the Ahom army defeated the vast Mughal Army by brilliant uses of the terrain, clever diplomatic negotiations to buy time, guerrilla tactics, psychological warfare, military intelligence and by exploiting the sole weakness of the Mughal forces- its navy. The famous words used by Lachit Borphukan i.e. "The king has put all the people in my hands to fight the Bengal- Shall I go back to my wife and children?" helped to defeat the Mughal army in this crucial Battle by morale bolstering the Ahom army, is worth mentioning.

Sivasagar:16

Sivasagar is 369 kms towards the east of Gauhati. This town exudes old world charm with its historical monuments scattered across the town. Every piece of architecture build in the bygone era ruled by Ahom dynasty provides links to history. It abounds monuments of national importance and sculpture importance. It has Sivadol, a tallest temple in Assam. The Temple was built by Bar Raja Ambika, Queen of Ahom king Swargadeo Siba Singha in 1734 A.D. It is believed to be the tallest Shiva temple in India. The Shivadol stands tall proudly at 104 feet on 32 m height and perimeter in 195 ft and 59 meters at the base. A beautiful eight feet high Golden dome known as 'Kalasi' adorns the Shiva Temple. The Temple has become a pilgrim's place of top choice for Hindus of India.

Some of the historical buildings with Ahom artiture are Talatal Ghar, Rang Ghar, the Karing Ghar etc. The Talatal Ghal is a 7 storied building with 4 floors of basement and 3 floors above the ground. It is an amazing simplistic palace for the Ahom kings. Rang ghar remains Asia's largest amphitheatre and was the cultural playground for the Ahom kings. The Kareng Ghar in Gurgaon was the principal palace and home to the Ahom kings who ruled Assam for 600 years. There is also a lake known as the Siva Sagar Lake which was artificially built on 125 acres of excavated earth with Sivadol on its bank.

Sivasagar is not only place of great historical importance but also provides a unity in diversity-unique aspect India and Assam, since several temples for Hindus, a mosque for Islam, Buddhist monasteries are concentrated in the heart of the town and around the Sivasagar Lake.

Another socio-cultural importance of Sivasagar is that each year during the Shrivaratri, a huge mela(fair) is held in the Sivadol. The beautiful town of Sivasagar becomes a mahakumbh of devotees of Lord Shiva for three days.

Kamakhya Temple :17

Kamakhya Temple is one of the holiest of Hindu pilgrimage situated at Gauhati. The temple is located on the Nilachal hill at about 8 kms. from the Gauhati Railway Station. The Kamakhya temple is dedicated to the tantric goddesses. Apart from the deity Kamakhya Devi, compound of the temple houses to other avatars of Kali namely Dhumavati, Metangi, Bagola, Tara, Kamala, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Bhuvaneshwari and Tripura Sundari.

The temple of Kamakhya has a very interesting story of its origin. It is one of the 108 Shakti peeths . The story of Shakhi peeths goes like this, once Sati fought with her husband Shiva to attend her farther's great yagna. At the grand yagna, Sati's father Prajapati Daksha insulted her husband. Sati was angered and, in her shame, she jumped into the fire and killed herself. When Shiva came to know that his beloved wife had committed suicide, he went insane with rage. He place Sati's dead body on his shoulder and did the tandav dance i.e. the dance of destruction of the Universe. To calm down, Vishnu cut the dead body with his Chakra. The 108 places where Sati's body parts fell are called Shakti peeths. Kamakhya temple is special because Sati's womb and yani-female genital fell here.

In the meantime, the God of love, Kamadeva had lost his virility due to a curse. He sought out the Shakhti's womb and genital, and was freed from the curse. This is where 'God of love' gained his potency and thus the deity Kamakhya Devi was installed and worshipped here.

Khongjom:18

Khongjom is situated about 36 km from Imphal on the Indo-Myanmar Road. It is a place of utmost historical importance. It was Khongjom, a venue, where major General Paona Brajabashi and other brave Manipuri warriors proved their worth in the warfare against the mighty force of the invading British Army in 1891. This Anglo-Manipuri war was a landmark in the history of freedom struggle in India. This battle is accepted as the last battle fought by the native kingdom against the British Raj. The Battle of Khongjom is regarded in awe as a symbol of patriotism and valour of the Manipuris. A war memorial laid on the top of this venerable hill adds the historical ambience of the heroic site.

Bishnupur:¹⁹

Bishnupur is about 27 km. from Imphal. It is a historical and cultural centre of Manipur. This place prides itself of the 18th century Vishnu temple built on small bricks of Chinese model during the regime of King Bhagyachandra, when this place was made before the capital was shifted to Langthabal in 1779 A.D. And this idol of Vishnu was given to king King Kyamba (1467-1508 A.D.) by Shan King Chouja Khekkhomba. This idol of Vishnu showed that there was a close relationship between the Meiteis and the Shan of Myanmar. At the same time, it also indicated that Hinduism was widely spread in Burma (now Myanmar) and other parts of South East Asia since the early period. And, in fact, king Kyamba and King Khekkhomba defeated the chiefs of Khampat in 1470 A.D. and the Kabaw Valley was annexed to Manipur. So, this Vishnu temple had also a connection with the Kabaw Valley.

Another historical and cultural importance of this place is the Gopinath Temple. The idol of Gopinath was carved out from the same jackfruit tree from which the idols of Shri Shri Govindajee, Nityananda, Bijoy Govinda etc. were also carved out. Bishnupur is a pilgrimage place for the Meitei Hindus.

Moirang :²⁰

Moirang is located about 45 km from Imphal. Historically, the town of Moirang is famous for the ancient of the Pre-Hindus deity, Lord Thanging and epic love story of Khamba-Thoibi. It was from that the graceful Khamba-Thoibi dance originated. In a village name Ngangkhaleikai (now in Moirang Municipality), the old cloth used by Khamba and Nongban are still preserved.

Moirang has a special significance in the history of the Indian freedom struggle. During the World War II, the INA hoisted the Tricolour for the first time on the Indian soil on 14th April 1944 at Moirang with help of Manipuri INA members like Shri Mairembam Koireng etc. Following the hoisting of the flag, Moirang become the headquarters of the INA.

There is an INA Memorial in memory of those who lost their lives and dedicated themselves to India's freedom struggle with Bose. This memorial is only INA Memorial in India. This Memorial has exhibiting letters, photographs, badges of ranks and other articles and important documents associated with INA. A bronze statue of Netaji in uniform stands proud in the lawn. The site is quite popular with Japanese and English visitors who visit to pay tribute to their forefathers who perished in Manipur during World War II. Now, the INA complex be given the status of heritage site.

Red Hill or Maibam Lokpa Hill :²¹

Red Hill, a hillock is about 16 kms. from Imphal on Tiddim Road. It is a spot where the advancing Japanese troops from Tiddim Road were halted by the British, and a fierce battle was fought during the World War II. Japanese war veterans have constructed a monument at the foot of this hill in memory of Japanese soldiers who died in the battle of this spot. It is only the memorial of Japanese soldiers in the mainland Asia, and is a place of pilgrimage for Japanese tourists.

Harvai Khongai Ching :²²

Harvai Khongai ching lies at a distance of 102 kms from Imphal on Imphal-Ukhrul Road and an altitude of about 2000 m from sea level. The historical significance of place is that on this hill, during the World War II, the first fierce battle in Manipur fought between the invading Japanese troops led by Lt. General Renya Mutaguchi and the Allied forces of the British for the three days. The battle was won by the Japanese and then, they occupied Ukhrul Town for 100 days. On this hilltop, still, there are remnants of bunkers built by the British. There is one wooden tower made by the villagers of Veikhang area, to facilitate the sporadic tourists who come to see this place. British tourists are come to this historic battle site at least after 2/3 years, and many interested students and research scholars also occasionally came to see this important historic site.

Concluding Observation:

Tourism in North East India is at a nascent stage as the region is often described as land locked with the infrastructure development in every field. The region can also boast of having Majuli, the largest river island in the world, Mawlynnong-the cleanest village in Asia, the Imphal –Kohima Battle- Britain's greatest battle for all times, INA war memorial-the only of its kind in India and Japanese War Memorial at Red Hill- the only of its kind in mainland Asia. So, the region in spite of many drawbacks has a large tourist potential for Heritage and Cultural tourism by exploring historical valued destinations.

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