

Tourism Potentiality in North East India

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Abstract: *Tourism industry can be act as a revenue generator and as a catalyst for development in a region. Developed marketing strategies and logistics that include conducting sight-seeing tours, hospitality and communications are important for tourism to flourish in a region. The North-East India is plagued by multiple problems, from poverty to insurgency which have rendered it poorer and less connected than the rest of the country. Such reality has been preventing the North-East from realizing its full potentiality in tourism.*

Keywords: tourism, marketing, hospitality, communication, North-East.

1. Introduction

Tourism industry can act as a revenue generator and as a catalyst for development in a region. In order for the tourism potential of a region to be harnessed there is need for a security environment that is stable, complemented by cooperative administrative machinery. Developed marketing strategies and logistics which include conducting sight-seeing tours, hospitality and communications, and other necessities are constructive for tourism to flourish in a region. Tourism by definition is a regional activity. Each region, country, continent, city, town, village, ultimately has to fend for itself in the competition to attract tourists. Thus, financial capital along with publicity, can dramatically affect the tourism of an area.

The North-East India is plagued by multiple problems, from poverty to insurgency, which have rendered it poorer and less connected than the rest of the country. These realities, have thus far, prevented the North-East from realizing its full tourism potential. This paper will highlight the various measures taken by several government institutes to promote tourism in the North-East region, especially in Assam, and will underscore the shortcomings and challenges which plague the region.

2. Tourism and Development

Tourism provides direct benefits to the local community and businesses. It has a multiplier effect on other economic activities, providing jobs and incomes to those serving tourists through the supply chain and also as it is a labour intensive industry. The infrastructure required by tourism—transport, communications, water supply and health services—also benefits local communities and can be used for other activities like speeding disaster relief, providing for the local population and fuelling the overall development of the region. Tourism helps to create awareness about natural and cultural environmental preservation. Historical monuments undergo regular preservation if they are tourist attractions rather than fall into ruins. Tourism creates opportunities for small and micro-enterprises and helps in the development of the region [1].

2.1 Government Initiatives and Operations in the North-East

The Vision 2020 document released by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2008 for the Northeastern region earmarks infrastructure-led tourism development as one of the primary hopefuls for revenue generation. The Central Government has notified a new industrial policy, NEIIP 2007, for the NER for a period of 10 years with effect from 1.04.2007. The Policy provides incentives for new industrial units and existing units on their substantial expansion. The incentives include income tax and excise exemption, capital investment subsidy, interest subsidy, insurance subsidy and transport subsidy and are applicable to industrial units set up in the NER, regardless of their location. It earmarked Tourism and Hospitality Industry as one of the Thrust Areas for Investment in the NER [2].

M/O DONER has supported tourism industry of the North-East in the form of infrastructure development and capacity building, and in the form of training youth in tourism related activities, holding workshops on community based eco-tourism. It supports aviation hospitality training as well as pilot training. It promotes tourism advocacy programme which includes expos & business summits in major cities, craft & culture festival at Delhi haat, cultural shows in major cities, seminar /conclave on tourism, culture & heritage through FICCI. It has also provided support for Kaziranga centenary celebration and INDO-ASEAN & SAARC car rallies.

The NEC (Northeastern Council) has made significant contribution to the development of tourism related infrastructure in the North-eastern region which includes the creation of the north east tourism development fund of Rs.2 crore for preparing project profiles for setting up of budget hotels in all North-Eastern states. It provided support of Rs. 11.24 crore for construction of Yatri Niwas at Guwahati. The NEC has introduced a new scheme for development and promotion of inter-state tourism circuits under its annual plan 2007-2008. It is working with Ministry Of Civil Aviation for setting up a pilot training institute and upgrading airports. It has proposed to support a mountaineering and adventure sports institute. The NEC also proposes to support setting up heritage museums.

The Government is keen to improving connectivity in the region. For instance, the four lane east west corridor under construction from Porbandar to Silchar will provide connectivity to all capital cities along this lane. DONER and NEC have also funded construction of 3,660 km and 10,026 km roads respectively. The railway network within the region is being expanded and upgraded. The rail cum Road Bridge at Bogibeel and the Rangia to Murkongselek railway line has been declared as national projects [3].

3. Assam Tourism Forges Ahead

The Tourism Department of Assam has undertaken various developmental projects for promotion of Tourism in the state with the financial assistance of Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India as well as from its own resources. To showcase the various tourism products of the state as well as for its aggressive marketing, Assam Tourism had participated in various national and international tourism fairs and festivals like World Travel Mart, London, Arabian Travel Mart, Dubai, Geneva Festival, Bangladesh travel & Tourism Fair, Dhaka pacific Asia Travel Association Fair at Malaysia and Kolkata, etc.

The Tourism department is also involved in the following:

1. Setting up of a Five Star Hotel at Khanapara, Guwahati: - This is a major achievement as Guwahati did not have any 5 Star Hotel earlier.
2. Assam Tourism has introduced a scheme in the name and style of Chief Minister's Self Help Scheme to provide incentive to the unemployed educated youths of the state to ease out unemployment
3. Institution of a statue of Lachit Borphukan in the Brahmaputra River in Guwahati.
4. A promotional campaign has been launched at the domestic and international level through media within the budget of Rs. 15.00 lacs, provided by the Govt.
5. The Govt. had already participated in the Surajkund Crafts Mela held from 1st February to 15th February, 2012 at Surajkund Haryana successfully.
6. The International Tourism Mart was held in 18th January to 20th January, 2013 in Guwahati for the first time. The event was organized by the Ministry of Tourism Govt. of India in collaboration with Assam Tourism wherein delegates from 23 countries had participated.
7. Destination development of Haflong, Dima Hasao along with Helipad under the schemes 'Destination Development' has started with the aim of showcasing the scenic beauty and cultural heritage of Haflong, Dima Hasao as well as to set up a helipad for the tourists at Haflong.
8. To facilitate both national and International Tourists, Assam Tourism has successfully launched a luxury cruise vessel 'Mahabahu', with the financial assistance of Rs. 2618.66 lakhs from Government of India.

4. Challenges

Several shortcomings prevent the North-East and Assam from realizing its tourism potential. The region suffers from lack of infrastructure and communication bottlenecks, apart from general geographical isolation. Security handicaps add to the woes of the region and prevent tourists from

preferring the region for a holiday. Lack of an integrated policy by the Government is also a hindrance. Conducive investment opportunities are lacking. Other regions in the country offer better tourism deals and conditions.

The tourist operators in the North-East, along with the government tourism website should have facilities for online payment, accommodation, food and beverage arrangements, transport conveniences and travel bookings within the state and to the state, or provide links to other websites that provide such services.

The North-east governments and the Indian Government should attract tour operators both the national and international levels to establish offices elsewhere where North-East region-specific tours are made available to the population. If pre-packaged plans can be arranged, it may ease the travel planning for potential tourists to North-East.

In order to fulfill the goal of the North-East as a connective between mainland India and South East Asia, the North-East tourism websites and operators must provide details in Southeast Asian languages and perhaps have updates stressing the historical and cultural linkages between people and places in the North-East with the South-East Asian countries which would garner a feeling of belongingness and increase the chances of place in the North-East being chosen for a holiday or tour.

There is talk at the Central and State levels of the need for an integrated North-East plan or vision for tourism. A combined vision for tourism in the region would help its successful implementation. In such a plan connectivity and communication between the States would increase making travel easier and planning tours would become smoother for the operators. The North-East which is known for its rough and difficult terrain would be tamed if all the states built access according to a mutually accepted regional framework.

However, others argue that a combined vision where access is made smoother to all states might enhance the 'enclavization' of Assam and Sikkim, and tourists may continue to favor these locations, despite the investment made by all the other states.

There is another complaint that there has been very few market based research on the demand for tourism of people in India and abroad for tourism in the North-East. Without studies to clarify the demand it is futile to plan and implement grand tourism frameworks spanning the region, when other developmental necessities like schools and hospitals are lacking. In 2003, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) commissioned a study to formulate twenty year plans for a tourism programme. However, its recommendations still remain to be implemented.

Undoubtedly, the North-East and Assam can provide tourism of many kinds- eco-tourism, ethno-tourism, golf and tea -tourism , heritage-tourism, World-War II nostalgia tourism, adventure tourism, yet there is no brochure that is easily available where a foreign tourist can access the costs of a trip to plan a holiday where he/she can enjoy all these activities. Imagine a package which offers you seven or eight types of tourism in one trip, covering 7 days. It will not

only be a money-generator but also bring great activity to the place. It is important, however, to study the current tourism data, to figure out which kind of tourism is most appealing to people and also study the profile of tourists, so that that sector can be developed in order to attract the most number of visitors.

Investment has been tardy in the North-East due to difficulty in obtaining clearance and other adverse conditions. It has been suggested that the most viable investment model for the Northeast is the Public Private Partnership (PPP). The private sector, if properly attracted by making investment easier and lucrative, like offering tax-cuts etc, can reduce the pressure on the government by investing in several measures for the development of tourism [4]. For the public private partnership to succeed, the BOT (Build-Operate-Transfer) model could be followed. A government enterprise would build and operate the premises where tourism activity like accommodation or tour operations would take place, until the place begins to garner profits and then it can be handed over to a private entity. Most significantly, this would help overcome the land acquisition problem for the private players as the Government would be acquiring the land.

Air connectivity by all standards remains poor and negligible in the North-East. The North-East is not a priority sector and hence the prices remain very steep making it unviable for tourists. Greenfield airports, which are in the pipeline, remain in the planning process. The construction of the airport at Pakyong, Sikkim, is complete but is not yet operational. The Open Skies Policy as introduced by the ASEAN-India Aviation Cooperation Framework, which could facilitate trade and tourism, is yet to be implemented.

Air India's international flights between Guwahati and Bangkok which were initiated in 2003 came to a standstill in 2008. In 2009, DoNER offered subsidies to private airlines for the development of a regional air service, but there were no takers. In-bound demand for flights to the North-East still remains very low, night landings remain impossible in several North-Eastern airports which prevent private airlines from flying routes in the North-East. Night-landing facilities can easily be constructed, instead of spending money on aero-bridges as is seen in the Dibrugarh Airport. Increasing demand for North-East flights can be generated once the tourism and investment potentials are harnessed. The North-East should have special packages during holiday season like Pujas, Bihu and Hornbill and amply promote them in the rest of the country and abroad. Area restrictions are another hindrance to tourism in the region. The Restricted Area Permit (RAP), Protected Area Permit (PAP) and the Inner Line Permit (ILP) need to be reviewed to promote tourism. Indian citizens require the ILP to visit Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram; the PAP and the RAP are applicable to foreign nationals who have to be granted special permission to travel on recognized routes by the authorities. Conditions are also applied on group, restrictions on the number of days and travel only on recognized routes. Such restrictions are absent in most of the other regions and these could be lifted, after, a thorough security analysis is conducted. The North-East region is largely known to the rest of India as a haven of insurgents, there is a need to dispel this image and of course, to prevent and arrest insurgency. On a positive note, the PAP restrictions on

Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland, with the exception of nationals from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Myanmar, have been lifted for a year from 1 January 2011.

Infrastructure development is central to attracting tourists. High hygiene and sanitation standards should be maintained. Accommodation, Roads and other communication, Wayside facilities, Transport, Product development and destination management, Information guides should be upgraded and constructed [5].

Human resource for the tourism industry should come from the region and for this each state should be equipped with a food and beverage institute and an institute of hotel management. This will provide opportunity for the locals. For tourism to help poverty alleviation and employment creation, meaningful arrangements for people's participation should be evolved.

5. Conclusions

Although there are several measures being taken by the State and the Centre to upgrade tourism potential of the North-East but it still remains one of the least preferred choice as a tourist destination. Image improvement, infrastructure upgradation, and administrative and security concerns need to be handled for tourism to flourish as a development industry with community participation [6].

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