
BOOSTING RURAL TOURISM IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

Tourism is considered to be one of the world's largest service industries yielding sizeable benefits to the economy of a place. It is an important tool for generating employment, alleviating poverty and attaining sustainable development. It is also an important stimulant for facilitating the growth of infrastructure, exploring the various unexplored areas and resources of a region, particularly the rural areas, thus offering vast tourism development potential besides sustaining the life, culture, identity and the ecosystem of the tourist location. There is also an injection of foreign exchange earnings to the country and the region through the foreign tourist arrivals. Rural tourism has also gained wide popularity in the recent decades particularly for those tourists visiting for leisure and adventure. The North Eastern Region has been termed as 'paradise unexplored'. The tourism industry is a good resource potential for the region with its diverse culture and identity, ecosystem and way of life of the people. The North-East region of India also has rich bio-geographic areas which has a vast potential for developing ecotourism. India's Look East Policy and the 'Incredible India' campaign are important prerequisites for boosting rural tourism in the region which will not only ensure a mutually enriching experience between the tourists and the local people but it can also help to uplift the socio-economic conditions of the people in the region through such tourist explorations.

Key words: *Travel and tourism, rural tourism, north east, biodiversity and ecosystem*

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Tourism is considered to be one of the world's largest service industries yielding sizeable benefits to the economy of a place. It has become a major source of foreign exchange earnings, employment generation and an important contributor to the revenue earnings of the government (UNEP, 2002). Even at the global level, the growth and diversification of tourism since the 1950s has been remarkable. Tourism has been considered as an important tool for driving the engine of growth of an economy in terms of generating employment, raising the level of income, improving the livelihood aspects of the society, alleviating poverty and also in attaining sustainable human development. The statistics provided by the World Travel and Tourism Council in 2002, showed that travel, tourism and other related activities contributed approximately 9.4 percent of the world's GDP. The trend continued wherein it was reported that in 2009 the industry contributed over US \$ 13 trillion to the global revenue (De and Devi, 2010). In the last few decades, the rate of growth of tourism was moving at a very fast rate particularly in many Asian and Latin American countries (Roe et al. 1997, Goodwin, 2007). Tourism has a vast potential for growth which can facilitate not only the growth of infrastructure but it can also act as a stimulant for various cultural activities which would help in enriching the experience and relations and also develop a better understanding between the tourists and the hosts (local people).

Tourism Industry in India:

The tourism sector is also viewed as a key foreign exchange earner. In recent years, the tourist arrival in India, both foreign and domestic tourists, has shown a remarkable trend with the Ministry of Tourism estimating around 7 to 8 million foreign tourist visitations to the country each year. The report of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India in 2010, showed that in the year 2009 itself, there were over 5.11 million foreign tourists visiting the country. The number of domestic tourists in 2008 was estimated to be around 562.9 million. The foreign tourist arrivals in India during 2011, was 6.29 million with a growth rate of 8.9 percent as compared with 5.78 million in 2010 (Table 1). The domestic tourist visitation during 2010 are estimated around 740.2 million, showing a growth of 10.7 percent over the year 2009. Recently, the "Incredible India" campaign was initiated as an all-out effort to promote the tourism industry of the country in the overseas market and also to attract foreign as well as domestic tourists. It can be said that this campaign has surely proved to be fruitful with India moving up in its ranking in the list of world's attractive tourist destinations. According to the report of the World Economic Forum in 2009, India's ranking was 11th in

the Asia Pacific region and 62nd overall on the list of World's Attractive Destinations. Further, it was ranked as the 14th best tourist destination for its natural resources and 24th for its cultural resources, with many World Heritage sites, both cultural and natural, rich flora and fauna, and also strong creative industries in the country. In terms of its network connectivity, India was ranked 37th for its air network transport. Further, in terms of its long term (10 year) growth, the travel and tourism industry was ranked 5th rank and is further expected to be the second largest employer in the world by the year 2019.

The Indian Tourism development Corporation (ITDC) which was incorporated in 1996, is an important unit of the Ministry of Tourism in facilitating the process of development of tourism infrastructure in the backward areas thereby promoting regional balance. The Planning Commission had set up a Working Group on Tourism (WGT) under the chairmanship of Secretary (Tourism) to inter alia recommend strategies for tourism development during the 12th Five Year Plan. Some of the strategies include infrastructure development, marketing, branding and promotion, taxation and incentives, hygiene and sanitation, safe and honourable tourism, development and promotion of niche tourism products, convergence and also the involvement of States/UTs in tourism development.

Rural Tourism:

In recent years, the tourism industry is steadily gaining popularity and increasing focus is being paid to this sector. Over the last decade, rural tourism and eco tourism is increasingly gaining popularity with the objective of generating employment, reduce the out migration of people from the villages to the urban centres, promote sustainable development, supporting and protecting the environment and the eco system, while at the same time showcasing and preserving the rural life, art and culture and heritage of the rural people.

The Ministry of Tourism has defined rural tourism as “any form of tourism that showcases 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, however, unlike ecotourism, is understood differently across the globe. Rural tourism should not be confused with ecotourism because rural tourism may not necessarily imply protection and conservation of the environment. It is much more community-oriented with the aim of preservation of the art, culture, tradition and heritage of the rural locations, whereas ecotourism is more holistic and has a greater role in the protection and preservation of the environment besides showcasing the rural life, art, culture and heritage of the people in the villages. In fact, rural tourism is an

activity which is multifaceted and could encompass farm or agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, sports and adventure tourism and also ecotourism. Over and above all these, the report of the Ministry of Tourism in 2007, had specifically stressed on the 'sustenance issues' before the implementation and commencement of any rural tourism scheme. The concept of developing rural tourism as a strong platform for developing the rural economy can definitely prove useful particularly to cater to a population of a country like India with over 70 percent of its population residing in the villages.

The tourism sector which encompasses a multi-sectoral activity could use the services of ministries of rural development, culture, environment and tribal welfare, through a strong public-private partnership for facilitating tourism development. Rural tourism can also be seen as an alternative source of providing means of livelihood and employment. In fact, it can be promoted as an activity which is supplementary to agriculture though not substituting agricultural income. In other words, it can help to generate an additional source of income for the rural people besides their agricultural income. Rural tourism can be harnessed as a strategy for rural development. That is, for regeneration of the rural economy rather than for diversification. Due to the growing constraints and insufficiency in the agricultural economy and livelihoods, the rural people are driven to look for new sources of growth and activities which offer better economic opportunities. It is in this context, therefore, that rural tourism can be promoted as a new activity which is supplementary to agriculture that can help in attaining sustainability, alleviate poverty and also fight rural unemployment.

Rural Tourism Development in North East India:

The North East India comprising eight states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim is a strategically important location sharing international boundaries with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar. The region is also endowed with diverse tourist attractions and each state has its own unique distinct features which constitute the tourism resources at large and thus offer huge potential for tourism development. The region is located at one of the world's richest bio-geographic areas (Das, 2012-13). The region has immense potential for ecotourism. The North Eastern Council had published a report in 2008 on its Vision 2020 whereby it had laid down the potentials of developing tourism in the region focusing on four concentric circles such as (i) Intra-state, (ii) Inter-state, (iii) Pan Regional within the region as well as other regions of the country, particularly the eastern region, and(iv) International tourism.

Development of the tourism industry would require exploration and conversion of the prospective areas and places into a form of 'attractive' tourist products. There is also a need to devise a proper selling mechanism of these tourism products for the success and growth of this industry. The North East Region is a unique example of 'paradise unexplored', being endowed with a unique and rich biodiversity, its thick forest cover, cascading rivers, exotic flora and fauna, diverse ethnicity and distinct cultural identity, varied customs and traditions, food habits, way of life, etc. serve as invaluable assets for the development of the region. The tourism industry can provide as an amicable source of strength for the upliftment of the region through the ample employment opportunities that this industry has to offer. The various operational areas in the tourism industry also offer immense opportunities for the entrepreneurs of the region. Moreover, there would be better social and economic empowerment of the people in general and the rural population in particular besides improving the socio-economic conditions of the people and ensuring a better quality of life through the tourism sector. Further, promotion of tourism can provide benefits to the local community by enabling interactions between the tourists and the local people and thereby gain mutually enriching experience.

There is much hype about India's Look East Policy and also the 'Incredible India' campaign for the purpose of boosting tourism in the country. The number of tourist arrivals is also only marginal in the region mainly due to the lack of infrastructure and other tourist amenities at various attractions and locations in the region. In a way, the tourism industry of the region still remains largely unexplored.

The rural tourism scheme is considered to be an important tool for bringing the rural stakeholders in touch with the tourism sector for increasing employment basically for the fact that this industry is highly labour intensive in nature. Rural tourism can also help boost the economy of a state or a region and act as a catalytic agent of economic growth by providing the means to increase the viability and competitiveness of the underdeveloped locations and improve the living standards of the local community and the population as a whole. Rural tourism has the potential to generate employment.

Moreover, through tourism, the various aspects of economic development such as infrastructure, communications, services, etc can be brought together. One important aspect to be kept in mind while initiating the move towards rural tourism development is that the basic cultural identity of the local should not be affected. So, besides preserving the basic cultural identity of the local community and the local people, rural tourism should aim at

improving the quality of life of the people through improved socioeconomic conditions, provide good experience to both the tourists and the hosts and also at the same time preserving the environment, the culture and heritage of the people.

Thus, considering the immense potential of tourism in contributing to the state's economy, there is a need for the government to design specific plan development strategies for exploiting new unexplored areas along with the increased participation and involvement of the local communities and the people so as to ensure that the benefits of the tourism industry would accrue to the local population and the state as a whole.

Potentials for boosting tourism development in the North Eastern Region:

As mentioned earlier the North Eastern Region of India has been termed as 'paradise unexplored' by the Ministry of Tourism. This holds true in the real sense of the term because of the incredibly vast potential that the region has to offer for the development of the travel and tourism industry here. The rich natural biodiversity of the region, its people, culture, ethnicity, language, traditions, food habits, etc. would be quite enchanting for tourists visiting the region. However, despite its incredible tourism potential, the region has not been successful enough to attract tourists, foreign and domestic tourists, mainly because of the poor infrastructural conditions of the region - physical, social and cultural infrastructure backwardness. The budget allocation for the development of tourism in the region is also abysmally low with only 10 percent of the plan allocation being earmarked for tourism development in the region.

The North Eastern Region has an advantageous position in India's Look East Policy. This is so because of the historical as well as cultural relations that the region has with South East Asia. One of the main reasons for the backlogs in rural tourism development in the region is the poor and inadequate infrastructure development in the North East. For the purpose of boosting rural tourism in the region, infrastructure development projects should be taken up which again would require huge investments which would be possible only with adequate flow of fund.

The scheme of Rural Tourism was started in 2002-03 with the objective of showcasing the rural life, culture, heritage and also the handicrafts, handloom and textiles all which have an asset base with the natural environment. In doing so, the local people could be the main beneficiaries both economically as well as socially besides enabling the local community to interact with the tourists and thereby have a mutually benefiting and enriching experience. The promotion of rural tourism is also aimed at generating revenue for the rural communities

through tourist visitations which would help to check the outmigration of people from the rural to the urban centres. A number of infrastructure as well as capacity building projects have been initiated and funded by the Ministry of Tourism. According to the annual report of the Ministry of Tourism 2011-12, there are 189 sites that have been identified for rural tourism projects. Out of these, 55 sites are situated in the North Eastern states. The tasks of implementing these projects have been assigned to the Village Level Councils as an interactive forum for the local community.

In fact, the Ministry of Tourism has earmarked 10 percent of its plan allocation towards the development and promotion of tourism in the North East Region. An amount of Rs.110.00 crores has been earmarked in the budget estimate of 2011-12 for the region. The grant of financial assistance includes for the development of tourist infrastructure, promotion of fairs and festivals and tourism related events in the region. Further, the Ministry also gives Central Financial Assistance for creating infrastructure and for human resource development in rural areas for a sustainable tourism in the form of rural tourism projects. In 2011-12, the Ministry had sanctioned an amount of Rs.2.34 crores for various rural tourism projects to different states in the North East Region. Given that infrastructure development is an important prerequisite for a meaningful involvement of the North East Region in India's Look East Policy and the process of globalisation, the tourism and infrastructure development projects would have to be undertaken on a war footing with due importance to be given towards assuring the social and cultural security and sustainability of the indigenous people and also protection of the other natural invaluable assets of the region. A beginning towards achieving the objective of fostering growth of the tourism industry, more specifically development of rural tourism in the region would have to be made soon. This initiative could also be made possible through a wilful and active participation of the government, the administration, together with the cooperation and coordination of the local people.

Table-1: Foreign Tourist Arrivals and Foreign Exchange Earnings, 2000-2011.

| Year | Foreign Tourist Arrivals (in nos.) | Annual Growth (%) | Foreign Exchange earnings (Rs. Crore) | Foreign Exchange Earnings (Million US \$) |
|------|------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| 2000 | 2649378 | 6.7 | 15626 | 3460 |
| 2001 | 2537282 | -4.2 | 15083 | 3198 |
| 2002 | 2384364 | -6.0 | 15064 | 3103 |
| 2003 | 2726214 | 14.3 | 20729 | 4463 |

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|------|---------|------|--------|--------|
| 2004 | 3457477 | 26.8 | 27944 | 6170 |
| 2005 | 3918610 | 13.3 | 33123 | 7493 |
| 2006 | 4447167 | 13.5 | 39025 | 8634 |
| 2007 | 5081504 | 14.3 | 44360 | 10729 |
| 2008 | 5282603 | 4.0 | 51294* | 11832* |
| 2009 | 5167699 | -2.2 | 54960# | 11394# |
| 2010 | 5775692 | 11.8 | 64889# | 14193# |
| 2011 | 6290319 | 8.9 | 77591# | 16564# |

Source: Annual Report, Ministry of Tourism, GOI.

Note: # Advance Estimates * Revised estimates

Table-2: Foreign Tourist Arrivals in India According to Mode of Travel, 2000-2011

| Year | Arrivals | % Distribution by Mode of Travel | | |
|------|----------|----------------------------------|-----|------|
| | | Air | Sea | Land |
| 2000 | 2649378 | 98.5 | 0.0 | 1.5 |
| 2001 | 2537282 | 87.1 | 0.9 | 12.0 |
| 2002 | 2384364 | 81.9 | 0.6 | 17.5 |
| 2003 | 2726214 | 83.1 | 0.5 | 16.4 |
| 2004 | 3457477 | 85.6 | 0.5 | 13.9 |
| 2005 | 3918610 | 86.5 | 0.4 | 13.1 |
| 2006 | 4447167 | 87.1 | 0.6 | 12.3 |
| 2007 | 5081504 | 88.4 | 0.6 | 11.0 |
| 2008 | 5282603 | 89.1 | 0.7 | 10.2 |
| 2009 | 5167699 | 89.8 | 1.0 | 9.2 |
| 2010 | 5775692 | 91.8 | 0.7 | 7.5 |
| 2011 | 6309222 | 92.0 | 0.8 | 7.2 |

Source: Bureau of Immigration, India

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