

Tourism Industry and Economic Development of Assam

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INTRODUCTION

India's "**Look East**" Policy, which was initiated in 1991, marked a strategic shift in India's perspective of the world. It was developed and enacted during the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and rigorously pursued by the successive governments of Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. Along with economic liberalisation and moving away from Cold War-era policies and activities, India's strategy has focused on forging close economic and commercial ties, increasing strategic and security cooperation and the emphasis of historic cultural and ideological links. India sought to create and expand regional markets for trade, investments and industrial development.

In this context, the impact of Look-East Policy on the tourism industry of India is very significant. Tourism is "activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes" (WTO 2002). Tourism emerged from being a relatively small scaled activity into a global economic sector from the 1960s onwards. Tourism is the second largest foreign exchange earner in India. The tourism industry employs a large number of people, both skilled and unskilled. It promotes national integration and international brotherhood. India has fascinated people from all over the world with her secularism and her culture. There are historical monuments, beaches, places of religious interests, hill resorts, etc. that attract tourists. Every region is identified with its handicraft, fairs, folk dances, music etc. Hostels, travel agencies, transport including airlines benefit a lot from this industry. The tourist gets an insight into the rich and diverse cultural heritage of India and its people.

Tourism spending in India was USD 22 billion in 2001. The foreign exchange earning from this sector rose from USD 1861 in 1991 to USD 3533 in 2003. During 2006, 4 million tourists visited India. In rupee terms, tourism receipts have grown from Rs.7.7 crores to Rs.11540 crores in 1998 and Rs.18883 in 2005. Many states have taken necessary steps to promote tourism. In this context North-East India cannot be ignored.

Northeast India is the north-eastern borderland of South Asia and also the north-western borderland of Southeast Asia. The North-eastern region of India is a store-house of mineral resources, bio-diversity and water resources. But these natural bounties are yet to be harnessed. In recent years the development of this region is being factored into the overall strategy of national development as well as in the conduct

of India's relations with the other countries. India's Look East policy, which identifies Northeast India as the gateway to the East, is one such major initiative undertaken by the government of India.

Look-East and the North-East

The North Eastern States of India are often described as land locked. They are joined to the rest of India by a narrow land corridor that skirts the north of Bangladesh. This land corridor is only 21 to 40 Km in width and is known as the Chicken's Neck. With the release of the document "North Eastern Region Vision 2020" by the Prime Minister in July 2008 a serious effort has been made for socio-economic development of this region to match with the objectives of the Look East Policy.

The tourism industry has been a major sector for development of North-East India. Several measures have been undertaken under the aegis of the Look East policy to uplift North-East India such as the "Asian Highway", "Asian Railway link" and "Natural Gas pipeline". The Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport facility is aimed at establishing connectivity between Indian ports and Sittwe port in Myanmar through riverine transport and road links in Mizoram. With the Ganga Mekong initiative there is potential for direct flights between Guwahati -Ho-Chi Minh city – Imphal – Hanoi. .

North-East India is a paradise of tourists. Its enchanting hills, dancing rivers, roaring waterfalls, thick forests has been attracting people from different parts of the world since time immemorial. Assam, one of the constituent states of the region, an embodiment of the natural beauty and grace, with dense forests, heavy rains during monsoon, innumerable varieties of flora and fauna, countless species of wild animals and plants, mysterious clouds, melodious folk music, thrilling dances and festivals, variety of many delicious dishes, handlooms and handicrafts, and above all its green landscape representative of the region, has been at the centre stage of tourist attraction.

The Problem

North-East India has unique cultural and ethnic diversity. It comprises of the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland respectively. Assam in particular has vast potential for tourism. It can develop cultural, lifestyle, adventure and eco-tourism. The rivers, forests and mountains provide scope for adventure and eco-tourism. Besides creating opportunities for tourist guides, conducted tours, establishment of hotels, and so many other avenues in the tertiary sector, tourism can be a major source of employment in Assam. But tourism in North-East

India is not booming to its full extent. The purpose of the study is to highlight the potential of tourism in fostering economic development. It studies the trends in the flow of tourists to the North-East India. In this context, focus is also made on the problems which restrict the growth of tourism in North-East India.

Review of literature

While reviewing the literature the following research work has been found as important in the study.

Singh (2007) examined the role tourism trade and liberalization plays in fostering or constraining sustainable development. He explored what are the opportunities and barriers to achieving sustainable development through trade and tourism services in context of Agra and Varanasi, two popular tourism destinations in India. Various economic issues were viewed and various environmental issues were observed which led to resource depletion and degradation.

Hans (2005) traced the progress made by India's tourism industry in the planning era and the emerging issues under globalization. It examined the impact and challenges posed by GATS and the burgeoning service sector of the country as well as the pitfalls in tourism planning in India.

Goodwin et al.(2004) tried to analyze how businesses in travel and tourism increase the contribution of the industry to local economic development and pro-poor growth. They observed that their needs to be a co-ordinated approach across the sector and this include the financiers, developers, operators, hoteliers and government. This could be achieved through adoption of a framework to guide those involved in the sector.

Mathur et al. (2009) discussed the opportunities and challenges of Kaziranga National Park over the next fifty years. It highlighted the risks of the area becoming an island in the sea of development in addition to the major problems and future challenges which obstruct its growth as a major tourist attraction. Lastly they focused on the need for a landscape approach with proper planning for the future in order to make it a major tourist destination.

George (2007) studied the important organizational innovation in the SME sector of the tourism industry. He studied the genesis and growth of household tourism in Allepey, Kerala. It highlighted the benefits of cooperative alliance in an industry like tourism, provision of authentic products and concern over the sustainable development of the region.

OBJECTIVES

The study revolves around the following broad objectives:

1. To examine the potential of tourism in fostering economic development in North-East India.
2. To study the trends in the flow of tourists to the North-East India.
3. To identify the impediments that restricts the development of tourism in North-East India.

METHODOLOGY

The data has been collected from various secondary sources. These secondary data has been collected from sources such as the Directorate of Tourism, Assam and the Assam Tourism Development Corporation Ltd (ATDC). Various information as regards the existence of tourism places, status of tourism, revenue earned from tourism etc. was obtained from these sources respectively.

Tourism Potential

Tourism is one of key sectors identified in the NE vision 2020 towards achieving an encompassing (inclusive) development of the region. North-East India has the potential to attract tourists of diverse interests. It has diverse endowments of tourist interests. The existing and potential variety of tourism can be listed as follows:

1. Nature Tourism- scenic beauty.
2. Eco-tourism- mountains, lakes, rivers, forests, biodiversity hot spot.
3. Cultural Tourism- an array of festivals and range of colourful handlooms and handicrafts.
4. Pilgrim Tourism- Buddhist monasteries- Rumtek and Tawang, temples at Kamakhya, churches etc.
5. Adventure Tourism- river rafting, mountaineering, trekking virgin unexplored terrain.

6. Golf Tourism-golf courses especially in Assam and Meghalaya.
7. Heritage Tourism-tribal festivals, tribal and world war-II cementaries at Kohima and Imphal.
8. Wildlife Tourism-wildlife sanctuaries, national parks etc.

Tourism in Assam is essentially nature based, therefore, natural parks and sanctuaries, rivers, lakes, warm water springs, forests, wild life, are the principal components of tourist attraction. These places can be grouped together under four categories: (a) nature-related, (b) historical, (c) religious and (d) others.

(a) Nature related:

Places in alphabetic order	Speciality
1. Bhairabkunda	A beautiful place at the border of Arunachal Pradesh
2. Bhalukpong	A beautiful place by the side of river Jia Bhoroli, famous for angling and water sports
3. Chandubi	A natural lagoon, beautiful picnic spot
4. Dibru-Chaikhowa	70 km from Dibrugarh, national park, the habitat of elephants, buffaloes, famous for wild horses
5. Haflong	One of the hill stations in Assam with unsurpassed sylvan beauty
6. Jatinga	Near Haflong, North Cachar district, a beautiful hilly place, where birds behave in a mysterious way, the local people call that the birds commit suicide here on certain specific days
7. Kaziranga	Internationally famous national park, the home of great Indian one-horn rhinoceros, tigers, elephants, buffaloes, deer, wild ducks and geese, breeding place of pelicans, habitat of reptiles and monkeys more particularly golden langurs and host of other species

8. Manas	Situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, one of the magnificent national parks in the country, the Manas river flows through it, famous for the tiger project, a habitat for various wild animals
9. Orang	A wild life sanctuary, known as a miniature Kaziranga
10. Pabitara	A wild life sanctuary
11. Potasoli	38 km from historic town of Tezpur, near the picturesque river Jia Bhoroli, famous for eco-camp set up jointly by the Department of Forest and Assam Anglers Association

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Guwahati

Wildlife

An attractive feature of the Assam's forestry is its colourful wildlife. Some of species are exclusive to the state. Assam is famous for as the home of one-horned rhinoceros. Some of the endangered species found in the state are hollock gibbon, the stamp tailed macaque, the capped langur, the golden langur, the pigmy hog, the clouded leopard, the golden cat, the white winged wood-duck, and the like. All these can make Assam as one of the best destination of the tourists.

There are five National Parks and eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries for protection and preservation of wildlife in the state. The five National Parks – Kaziranga, Manas, Nameri, Orang and Dibru-Saikhowa covers an area of 1561.14 sq km. The total area covered by eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries is 492.97 sq km.

(b) Religious

Places in alphabetic order	Speciality
1. Barpeta	Famous for a Vaishnava monastery
2. Batadrawa	Birth place of Shri Sankardeva, the Vaishnava reformer, saint and a great literary figure

3. Hajo	Sacred place for Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists
4. Kamakhya	An important religious place of the Hindus within the city of Guwahati, on the top of Nilachal hill, attracts thousands of devotees and other tourists every day by its natural grandeur
5. Madan Kamdev	Vast archeological ruins of fine erotic sculpture
6. Majuli	The largest river island in the world, centre of Vaishnava culture, seat of many satras which are known as the centres of Assamese art, dance, drama, music, a safe heaven for various migratory birds
7. Surya Pahar	Situated on a hill surrounded by innumerable statues of Durga Devi, Ganesha, Surya, Chandra, Buddha

(c) Historical

Places in alphabetic order	Specialty
1. Digboi	Famous for the first oil refinery in Asia, war cemetery of World War II
2. Sibsagar	Seat of the Ahom rule, famous for royal palaces, monuments, temples and massive ponds
3. Tezpur	Ruins of an ancient capital of the Mahabharata time, famous for the love story of Usha-Anirudha

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Guwahati

(d) Others

Guwahati situated on the bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra, it is a fast growing metropolis. Though unplanned, it is the gateway to the North-East India. It is well connected with the rest of India by rail, road and air. The places of worth visiting are: the famous Shakti temple of mother Goddess Kamakhya

on the Nilachal hills, the ancient Siva temple Umananda situated on the Peacock island in the middle of the river Brahmaputra, the Navagraha temple, Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Balaji temple, Science Museum, Vaisisthashram (founded by famous sage Vaisistha amidst grand natural beauty), the State Museum, the State Zoo-cum-Botanical garden, the Saraighat Bridge, the Lachit Barphukan Park etc.

Sualkushi: 32 km from Guwahati, known as the silk town of Assam, it is famous for Assamese silk, muga (golden thread) and other varieties of silk.

Status of Tourism

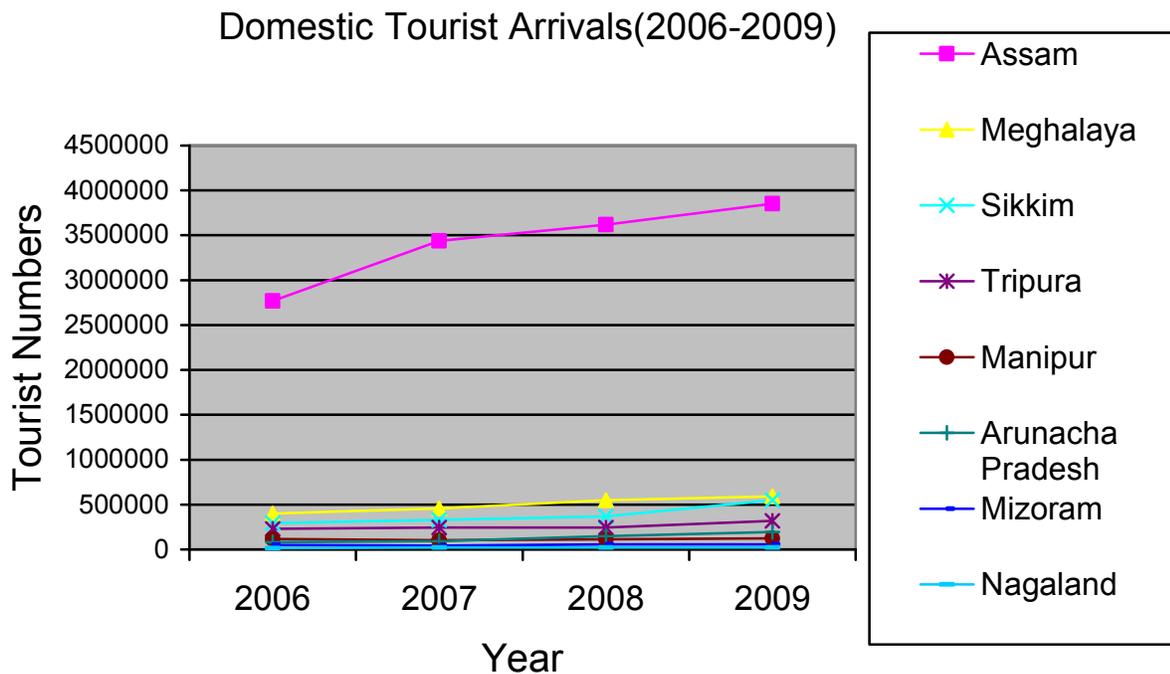
It was stated that the inflow of foreign tourists in India has registered a 6 per cent growth in 2000-01. Foreign tourists fetched \$3 billion to the Union exchequer making tourism the second highest net foreign exchange earner in the country. The Table below presents the inflow of both domestic and foreign tourists to North-East India:

Table1. DOMESTIC TOURIST INFLOW IN THE NORTH-EAST INDIA (2006-2009)

	2006	2007	2008	2009
Assam	2768824	3436833	3617306	3850521
Meghalaya	401529	457685	549936	591398
Sikkim	292486	329075	368451	547810
Tripura	230645	244795	245438	317541
Manipur	116984	101484	112151	124229
Arunachal Pradesh	80137	91100	149292	195147
Mizoram	50987	43161	55924	56651
Nagaland	15850	22085	21129	20953

Source: Directorate of Tourism

Figure 1.



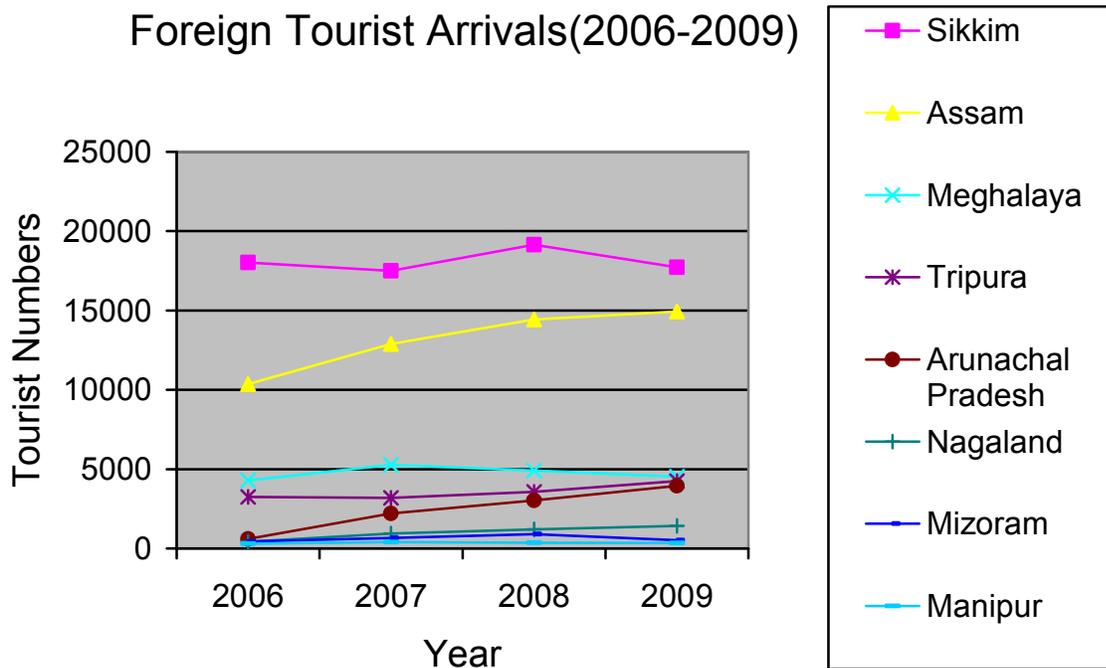
It is observed from the above table that Assam recorded the highest inflow of domestic tourists' arrivals in the North-East India amongst the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Sikkim, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. This number was far above the other states of the North-East Region. The states in decreasing order of their domestic tourist arrivals were Assam, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland respectively.

Table 2. FOREIGN TOURIST INFLOW IN THE NORTH-EAST INDIA (2006-2009)

	2006	2007	2008	2009
Sikkim	18026	17498	19154	17730
Assam	10374	12899	14426	14942
Meghalaya	4287	5267	4919	4522
Tripura	3245	3181	3577	4246
Arunachal Pradesh	607	2212	3020	3945
Nagaland	426	936	1209	1423
Mizoram	436	669	902	513
Manipur	295	396	354	337

Source: Directorate of Tourism

Figure 2.



It is observed from the above table that Sikkim recorded the highest inflow of foreign tourists' arrivals in the North-East Region. The states in decreasing order of their foreign tourist arrivals were Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland Mizoram and Manipur respectively.

A comparison between the two tables shows that the number of foreign tourist arrivals in the north-east region was very less than the domestic tourist arrivals to this region. Although the inflow of tourists (both domestic and foreign) to the North-East Region has been increasing over the years yet it is seen that the foreign tourist arrivals is far below the domestic tourist arrivals.

Tourism plays an important role in achieving economic development in any nation. Tourism has immense potential in fostering economic development in Assam. **Some contribution of tourism in obtaining economic development can be stated as follows:**

1) Eradicate poverty

Tourism can stimulate economic growth at local and national levels and promote the growth of agriculture, industry and service sectors. It can also provide a wide range of employment opportunities.

Also tourism business and tourists can purchase goods and services directly from the poor or enterprises directly employing the poor. This can, in turn, create opportunities for micro, small and medium sized enterprises in which the poor can participate. Domestic tourism in Assam can spread the development to or regions and remote rural areas that may not be benefited from other types of economic development.

2) Development of infrastructure

Tourism helps in the development of infrastructure through the construction of roads and tracks to different areas of tourist attraction.

3) Ensure environmental sustainability

Tourism can generate financial resources for conservation of the natural environment. It raises awareness about environmental conservation and promotes waste management, recycling and biodiversity conservation.

4) Development of a global partnership for development

It contributes to the socio-economic development of Assam through foreign exchange earnings and the creation of job opportunities. Tourism can stimulate the development of the transport infrastructure which can stimulate access to and from different places. It can reduce the burden on the public exchequer through implementation of public private initiatives. It creates decent and productive work for the youths of Assam. Also the infrastructure agencies play an important role in integrating tourism enterprises into global tourism markets.

Although Assam has the potentiality of developing tourism in a big way and foster economic development, it is seen that Assam faces certain problems which restrict its effectiveness as a tool for economic development.

Basic Problems

a. Absence of a Tourism Policy

The Government of India has a policy to develop tourism into an industry and a target to achieve in respect of attracting foreign tourists, who constitute an important source of hard foreign currency. As a result, process tourism has become the second largest foreign exchange earner. It is said that Assam has

a policy on tourism prepared in November 1987. Unfortunately, it is not available in any of the offices connected with tourism. It appears that there was an attempt in November 1987 to formulate a tourism policy and then in December 1992 an exercise was done to frame certain rules on tourism. It appears that these steps did not bring forth any concrete result. The media, in the recent time has been giving adequate publicity highlighting the importance of tourism in the economic development of the state. Most of the newspapers in both English and Assamese have been publishing a good number of articles in frequent intervals highlighting various aspects of tourism and its potentiality in the sustainable development of Assam.

b. Restricted Area Permit (RAP)

The RAP to the North-Eastern region was enforced in 1955 in the backdrop of alleged missionary involvement in the Naga rebellion. Under this a foreigner intending to visit North-East including Assam had to undergo a long arduous procedure of obtaining permission from the Home Ministry. With RAP in force till May 18, 1999 it was an uphill task for any foreign tourist to visit Assam and other places in the North-East. This proved to be a major obstacle in the path of tourism development in Assam.

c. Insurgency

Assam, and almost whole of North-East, has been experiencing violent movements over the years. The foreign and the domestic tourists consider it risky to visit this part of the country, in view of the prevailing law and order situation. The general impression has been that any foreign or domestic tourist could be a soft target of the insurgents. Therefore, they are reluctant to undertake an adventurous journey to Assam and North-East. But the general impression about the deteriorating law and order situation is enough to ward off any tourist.

d. Lack of Infrastructure

To attract tourists, there must be dissemination of information, infrastructural facilities like good hotels and tourist lodges, affordable and reliable communication network, clean and hygienic food and accommodation, availability of water sports equipment, and the like. Most of the places of tourist attraction are not by the side of the national highways, and approach roads are in bad condition. This is a strong discouraging factor, which works against a good inflow of the tourist. It appears that the potentialities for developing tourism to a stable source of revenue are not matched by proper policy and strategy.

e. Lack of Coordinated Efforts

There is a palpable lack of coordination among several agencies like Department of Tourism and Department of Archaeology in handling the demands of the tourists in places of both historic and religious importance. There is virtually no coordination between various public industries and private sectors like tea industry, oil and coal on one hand, and the Department of Tourism or Assam Tourist Development Corporation (ATDC), on the other, in the efforts towards developing eco and tea tourism. Similarly, there is no tangible and effective coordination between the twin bodies of Assam tourism, that is, the Directorate of Tourism and ATDC on one hand, and road and river transport system run by both Government and private sectors on the other. Therefore, stagnation has been the striking mark of the status of tourism in Assam.

f. Absence of Tourist Guides

Assam virtually does not have any trained guides placed in important places of tourist attraction. Consequently, as the tourists arrive at such a place there is hardly anyone to satisfy the inquisitiveness of the tourists. The Department of Tourism initiated a programme to train tourist guides. The effort did not yield good result as most of the trainees left the job. Some of them found other means of livelihood while others found it to be less paying because of the poor inflow of the tourists to the state. It is a chicken-and-egg syndrome which can be resolved by the state government by adopting a two-front strategy – (i) tourist guide training programme for a very limited number of youths, and (ii) setting a target of inflow of the tourists.

Suggestions

Tourism, thus, can be considered as an important sector for economic development. In this context, some recommendations can be made in the following ways-

- Proper planning of master plans needs to be prepared with specific objectives be integrated with Assam's overall economic and social development objective.
- Government intervention is necessary to enhance the contribution of tourism for socio-economic development and poverty reduction.
- Proper co-ordination and monitoring amongst various agencies and bodies of tourism.
- Private sector partnerships and public-private partnerships should be incorporated.

- Proper development of infrastructure, tourist facilities, enhancement of communication networks etc.
- Enhancement of the role of media in promoting tourism.
- States to identify inter-state circuits for relaxing RAP/PAP/ILP regime.

Conclusion

The results of the study have clearly demonstrated that tourism plays a major role in socio-economic development of the North-East India. Taking into account of its geographical proximity, its historical and cultural linkage with Southeast Asia and China and the primary objective of the Look East policy, it is being widely stated that Look East policy would result in rapid development of the region as it promises increased trade contacts between the North-eastern region with Myanmar, China and Bangladesh. For states of the North-East Region and Assam in particular, tourism is a sector in which they have comparative advantage for which they can effectively convert domestic resources into foreign exchange. The social significance of tourism measured in terms of employment is very large. Appropriate tourism related interventions can play a role in raising the standard of living and in reducing poverty. The Look-East Policy also has the potential of solving the problem of insurgency, migration and drug trafficking in the region through regional cooperation.

Thus, the development model resulting from India's Look East Policy has tremendous potential for the North East. It serves as a contiguous gateway to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries with which India has established engagement models. However, this would first require working on integrating the North East with the rest of India to make it a solid springboard for the globalization process the first step in this regard should be a focus on a rural-centric development model Tourism has great capacity to create large scale employment of diverse kind – from the more specialised to the unskilled. Hence through its proper planning and management tourism can fulfil the objective of fostering economic growth and development of a nation.

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