

Tourism: The Road Ahead

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Introduction:

Northeast India is a paradise for tourists. Its enchanting hills, dancing rivers, roaring waterfalls, thick and dark 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 used to attract people from different parts of the world since time immemorial.

Also known as NE, the region initially had the seven states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and were coined as the ‘Seven Sisters of India’. Later Sikkim also became part of NE. The zone is located at a latitude 21.57 and longitude 88 with an area of 15.5 million sq. km (7.8 % of the land mass of the country).

It borders China in North, Bangladesh to the South West, Bhutan and Nepal to the North West and Myanmar to the East. This makes NE a prospective hub of international trade & commerce. ‘Chicken Neck’ connects NE to the rest of India. It is a narrow corridor of 33 km on eastern side and 21 km on the western side. Approximately 70 % of NE is hilly region. Northeast India is one of the seven most bio diverse regions of the world. NE possesses more than 550 varieties of orchids, which is said to be almost 70% of the total orchid species identified so far.

Assam, one of the constituent states of the region, an embodiment of the natural beauty and grace, a true representative of the region, has been at the centrestage of tourist attraction. The recorded history tells that since the days of Hieu-en Tsang, the great Chinese traveller, who came to Assam during the reign of Kumar Bhaskar Burman (594-650 AD), Assam has been fascinating millions of people by its aura of myths, mystery, music, mountains, nay, all the gifts of nature. The ungrudging blessings of nature have made tourism in Assam essentially nature-centric, despite the fact that there are also historical and religious places of tourist attraction.

Tourism has generated employment in different parts of the country. 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. It is argued that every domestic tourist can generate direct and indirect employment of three persons, and this can be higher (seven) in the case of inflow of every foreign tourist. It is also projected that every

one million rupees invested in tourism, 47.9 direct jobs can be created, besides, of course, creating more avenues for indirect employment. Yet paradoxically it attracts few tourists. Why? What can we do about it?

The rationale behind the study:

Tourism is relevant because agriculture and manufacturing are location specific, but tourism can be promoted and developed almost anywhere.

Tourism is a known dispeller of cultural bias and blessed by Mother Nature the potential for tourism in the Northeastern region is tremendous.

Good number of technical and non technical people is available as manpower resource.

Tourism can be an instrument for improving the quality of life by protecting environment and providing gainful employment.

GOI is giving special attention to northeast India.

The objectives of the study:

To identify the different types of tourism & understand the potential to attract tourists of diverse interests.

To review and analyse the current state of affairs in terms of the **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.**

To identify & analyse the barriers to the growth of tourism in the north eastern states.

To understand the current status of tourism & the role of the government.

To evolve a strategy for the future to maximize the tourism potential in the NE.

Methology:

Study area: Data & information will be collected regarding tourism, the road ahead from across Northeast and Assam in particular.

Analysis:

Data will be analysed in detail to derive a generalized model on tourism the road ahead & its management. Such results will be supplemented with suggestions for the future course of actions.

North East shall be looked at large, along with the international tourism. Thereafter the reasons shall be analysed & presented. A moderately welcome development in international tourism in India in last five years has been the increase in business travel with its spin-off effects in upgradation of accommodation and introduction of new technology in communication and other services. Different travel agencies functioning as the conductors of tours are adding fuel to the rapid growth of tourism with different motives. The number tourists in Assam has increased in recent days due to the fact that the tourism department in Assam has been trying to enhance its performance with the support from the both state and the central government.

An important factor for tourism development in Northeast region could be the political will and commitment on the part of leadership at the central, state and district level and association of the

local people with a view of assuring them that tourism will in no way harm their interests. Far from it, tourism can be an instrument for improving the quality of life by protecting environment and providing gainful employment to the disadvantaged. Hopefully, this could be based on the agenda on tourism by the new government if it is inclined to show the much needed will to boost an industry that has come to be recognized for its key role in socio-economic development.

Tourism has emerged as one of the prospective sectors of industry in the northeast. Experts foresee a more explosive growth in this sector in the coming decades. In order to further accelerate the development of the sector, the thrust area pursued during the Ninth Five Year Plan were- (a) development of infrastructure; (b) product development; (c) development of trekking, winter sports, wildlife and beach resorts, (d) exploring new source markets in regions and countries having cultural affinity; (e) environmental protection and cultural preservation of natural heritage projects; (f) launching of national image building and marketing plan in key markets; (g) providing inexpensive accommodation in different tourist centers; (h) improving service efficiency in public sector corporations; (i) streamlining of facilitation procedures at airports; (j) human resource development; (k) monitoring and evaluation; (l) strengthening of organization; (m) creating awareness and public participation and; (n) facilitating private sector participation in development of infrastructure etc.

Indeed it's a virtual paradise for travelers, searching for continuous joy in Pilgrimage, Adventure, Culture, Nature, Heritage, Wildlife, Golf and Polo and many more. All these make a rich panorama. It's a land in the twilight of imagination and reality.

The barriers & challenges to the proper development of tourism have been manifold. Some of the key reasons will be analysed & presented.

North East India has been physically and emotionally marginalized from the rest of India. The biodiversity of this region is known to many, but experienced by very few.

Issues and problems like shortage of power generation capacity, over-dependence on hydro-power, absence of proper road connectivity, etc., need to be given special emphasis in order to help the region achieve high growth. High priority to be accorded to the development of roads in the North-East Region is well reflected in the Union Government's intention to invest nearly Rs.50, 000/- crores on the roads sector in the North-East over the Eleventh Plan period, that is, over the next 5 years.

The Ministry of Tourism calls the region a 'paradise unexplored'. Global tourism has been booming and future projections show that this trend will continue. The number of tourists worldwide is expected to swell to 1.5 billion and receipts from it are estimated to cross US \$ 200 billion. The new generations of cash-rich travelers are increasingly looking for unique experiences. For these new and growing breed of tourists the Northeastern states with their variety and uniqueness probably holds immense attraction. Yet while India's share in the world tourist influx is 44 per cent, the Northeastern region's share is a mere 1.2 percent of that

The tourist expenditure within the country is almost always equivalent to cash. It therefore has an advantage over traditional exports in respect of immediate cash flows. We need to understand who could be the direct & indirect beneficiaries.

With necessary infrastructure development within the region, and the building of connecting links between North-East and the rest of India, and North-East and South-East Asia, the

economic potential of the region can be suitably exploited. Time-bound implementation of projects, conducive centre-state relations and political stability, monitoring of fund-flows and necessary marketing and branding of the region can truly transform this goldmine of a region into a vibrant hub of business, tourism and trade.

Probable Conclusions could be:

The tourism potential of the Northeast has not been fully exploited. The Ministry of Tourism calls the region a 'paradise unexplored'. Global tourism has been booming and future projections show that this trend will continue. The new generations of travellers who are 'money rich and time poor' are increasingly looking for unique experiences. More and more people are looking at tourism as less of a journey and more of an experience – a phenomenon being called the emergence of the 'experience economy'.

For these new and growing breed of tourists the Northeast with its variety and uniqueness holds immense attraction. The rich natural beauty and its diversity, exotic cultural and ethnic mosaic, flora and fauna and the serenity of the virgin, unexplored ecosystems provide possibilities of a totally different experience for the tourists. All these details shall be analysed & presented in the paper