

**PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF CULTURAL TOURISM:
A CASE STUDY OF ASSAM, INDIA**

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Abstract

Cultural Tourism is the subset of tourism concerned with the country or region's especially its arts. It generally focuses on traditional communities who have diverse customs, unique form of art and distinct social practices, which basically distinguishes it with other types and forms of culture. Cultural Tourism includes tourism in urban areas, particularly historic or large cities and their cultural facilities such as museums and theatres. It can also include tourism in rural areas showcasing the tradition of indigenous cultural communities (i.e. festivals, rituals) and their values and lifestyles. The present study is taken up to assess the resources concerning cultural tourism of Assam, North East India to find a linkage of culture and tourism development and also the problems and prospects of cultural tourism.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Ziffer (1989), "Tourism involves travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objects of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects (both past and present) found in these areas". In today's world, tourism is an important socio-economic activity. In any area where a place of tourist attraction is located, there exists a tourist economy besides the domestic area economy. It also lends a hand to local handicrafts and cultural activities. Tourism in Assam as an industry is of recent origin. It has a strong relevance to economic development, cultural growth and natural integration. With her rich cultural heritage as manifest in many of the architectural wonders (temples, forests etc.), her widely varied topography, forests and above all, the great variety of the life style, Assam offers an unending choice for tourist.

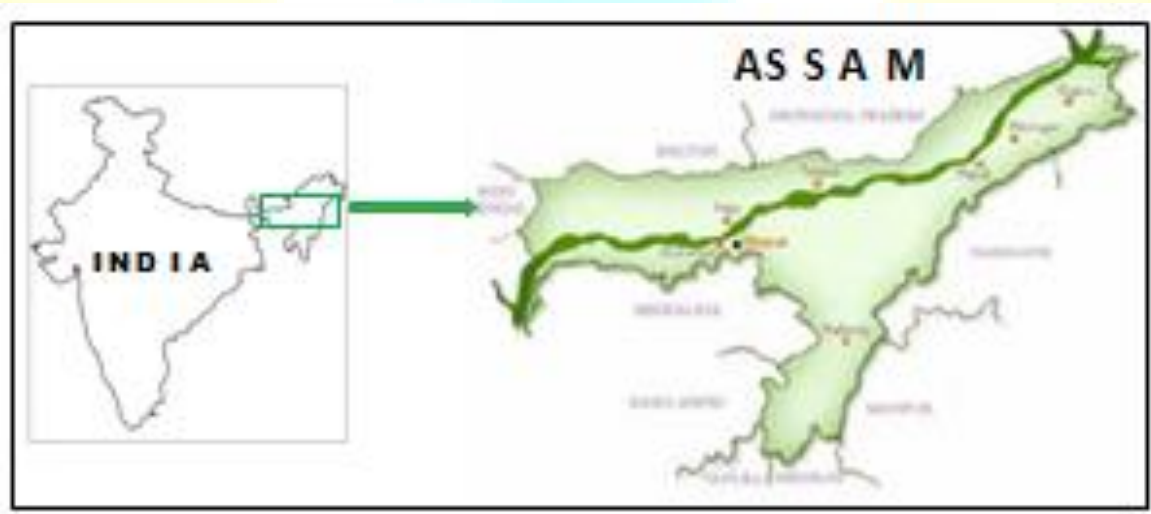


Fig-1 Location of the study area.

OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the resources concerning cultural tourism.
2. To study the linkage of culture and tourism development in the study region.
3. To highlight the problems and prospects of cultural tourism in the region.

METHODOLOGY

The present study draws on published documents of Department of Tourism, Government of Assam, Department of Art and Culture, Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam. The state is taken as the basic unit of the study. The study is descriptive in nature.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL TOURISM

Cultural Tourism is the subset of tourism concerned with the country or region's especially its arts. It generally focuses on traditional communities who have diverse customs, unique form of art and distinct social practices, which basically distinguishes it with other types and forms of culture. Cultural Tourism includes tourism in urban areas, particularly historic or large cities and their cultural facilities such as museums and theatres. It can also include tourism in rural areas showcasing the tradition of indigenous cultural communities (i.e. festivals, rituals) and their values and lifestyles. It is generally agreed that cultural spends substantially more than standard tourists do. For the present study, the term Cultural Tourism will be understood as travel directed towards experiencing the arts, heritage and specific character of a place so that the traveler will be able to learn about the history, heritage and lifestyle of others while contributing to the economic well being of the host community.

POTENTIALS OF INDEGENOUS CULTURAL TOURISM

INDEGENOUS PEOPLE

The populations of Assam are composed of a diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic stock. The geographical condition, physical features, soil, climatic condition together determines the culture and way of life of its people. As a whole the indigenous Assamese society is quite distinct from any other societies of India.

The inhabitants of Assam can be broadly classified into three categories namely – The Tribal's, The Non-Tribal's and the Scheduled Caste. The Tribal's of the state mainly live in hills and consists of people of various ethnic groups such as the Bodo-Kacharis, the Deories, etc. The non tribal's generally live in the plains which include the Ahoms, the Kayasthas, etc. The Scheduled Caste however includes the Baniyas, the Kaibartas etc. The culture of these three categories of people as depicted in its festival, dresses, costumes, handicraft, etc. may itself be an attraction for tourists.

FAIRS AND FESTIVALS

As Assam has various groups of people with their own social and cultural traditions, many types of fairs and festivals are held in the state which is of great importance from the tourism point of view as they can provide a good opportunity to experience their rich and diverse cultural heritage. The festivals practice by most of the groups are connected with agriculture and celebrated with ritualistic gaiety either to God for His providence or to pray for a bumper harvests. Bihu is one of such festivals celebrated mainly in Brahmaputra Valley. Other such festivals are Ambubachi Mela of Kamakhya temple, Shivaratri of Umananda, Tezpur, Sivasagar, Deodhal of Kamakhya, Rash of Majuli, etc. A number of fairs attracting tourists are also held namely the Jonbeel mela (Marigaon), Darranga Mela (Darranga in Nalbari). The tribal's of Assam celebrate various festivals of their own which are partly secular and partly socio-religious in nature (Table1).

Table - 1
Tribal festivals of Assam

TRIBE	FESTIVAL
Boro-Kachari	Baisagu, Kherai
Deoris	Bohaggiyo Bishu
Dimasa	Rajni Gabra, Harni Gabra, Rongper
Mishing	Ali Ali Ligang, Bisu
Karbis	Rongber, Chomangkan
Rabhas	Baikho
Tea Tribes	Tusu

FOLK DANCES AND MUSIC

The folk dance and music of Assam are also as rich and colorful as Assam itself. The vibrant steps, colorful attires and wonderful music used while performing the folk dances of Assam creates a magical ambience. Satriya dance has achieved international repute. Certain dances have religious significance while others are performed for mere entertainment. Some of the folk dances of Assam are Bihu, Satriya, Ojapali, Deodhani, Bagarumba, Baishagu, Gumrag, Kherai, Bayukh, Jhumur, Haacha Kekaan and Chomangkan.



Fig-2 Folk dances of Assam

To depict various mythological stories, Sankardeva developed Bhaona (drama) which are frequently held in Satras (religious monastery) and Naamghars (community house for prayer). This Satras and Naamghars attracts the tourists. The Vaishnavite art tradition also developed Borgeet (devotional song). Dhulia Oja by the drummers accompanied by acrobatics is practiced in Barpeta, Nalbari and Darrang districts. Assam has a rich tradition of puppetry and is still quite active in some parts of Assam. Moreover, Assam has more than ten indigenous moving theatres where one can enjoy the traditional as well as the contemporary Assamese culture.

INDIGENOUS ART AND CRAFTS

Indigenous cultural industries, particularly arts and crafts, are very popular with the tourists. Recent survey indicates that tourists regularly buy indigenous art and craft and the value of this art and craft sales far exceeds the current value of cultural tourism. The class and elegance of Assamese handicrafts holds a magnetic charm which can win anybody's heart and mind once for all.

Cane and bamboo products like dhara (mats), Khorahi (small basket), Jaapi (headwear) etc. form the backbone of Assam handicrafts and are most sought items both in the domestic as well as in the global market. The replica of the world famous Kamakhya Temple and the figure of the one horned rhino are the two most important woodcraft items of Assam, which are highly demanded by the visitors. Brass and bell metal products such as xorai, bota, kahibati etc. form the important metal crafts of Assam, which are known for their beauty, strength and usefulness. Handloom weaving is the identity of Assamese women. They are expert weavers of a variety of handloom garments like woolen shawls, gamochas (towels woven in cloth), and the unique and graceful mekhela-chadar (the traditional dress worn by Assamese women) made of paat and golden colored Muga-silk. In addition the Arts and Crafts of Assam also include masks used in Bhaonas, toys, ivory products, etc.



Fig-3 Art and Crafts of Assam

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS AND MONUMENTS

Assam is endowed with a number of historical monuments and structures which reflect its glorious history. The existing archaeological ruins go as far back as Gupta period (5th – 6th century AD), though their numbers are very few. Ruins of the post Gupta period are also to be found in different parts of the state. Stylistically all the remains belong to different North-Indian art tradition with local influences. There are as many as twelve archeological sites and about twenty-five major monuments dating back from 7th to 17th century AD.

The state of Assam is enriched with a number of holy shrines representing different faiths, which provide sanctity to these places. There are some such unique temples in Assam which naturally

came into existence without manmade effort and again there are such temples which reflect the architectural skill of the creative minds and artistic hands of the people residing here. These shrines can attract both domestic as well as international tourist. They are the Sukreshwara Temple, Kamakhya and Bhubaneswar Temple, Navagraha Temple, Umananda Temple, Poa Mecca, Satras of Majuli, etc.



Fig-4 Holy Shrines of Assam

PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURAL TOURISM

In spite of having such a vast potentiality the region has not been able to develop cultural tourism for the following reasons:

1. Poor state of publicity- Though the state has a lot of cultural resources, it has not been able to give due publicity in national and international arena and thus tourist mobility is restricted to only a couple of destinations.
2. Lack of renovation of archeological spots and monuments- Only a couple of archeological spots and monuments have been renovated so far.
3. Inadequate infrastructural facilities- Infrastructural facilities are highly inadequate in the state for tourism, both in terms of transportation and accommodation.
4. Lack of imaginative organization- Imaginative organization of the shows of traditional local art, culture, dance, drama, music session, fairs and festivals for the benefit of the tourists is lacking.
5. Attitude of people- Hospitality is a quality which is required in cultural tourism. The poor role played by the people in this respect affects the growth of tourism.
6. Socio-political unrest- Another very important deterrent to the development of cultural tourism is the socio-political unrest that is going on here. Bandhs, hartals, curfew and insurgency hinders to the growth of the tourism.
7. Lack of promotion of indigenous crafts- Practically nothing has been done in the state to sell the rich folk and cultural heritage as well as crafts through tourism.

PROSPECTS OF CULTURAL TOURISM

Tourism sector has been developing as a source of income and employment generation in Assam also. If there is an industry with enormous potential for growth and development in the region than it is the 'Tourism industry'. The indigenous cultural tourism requires integration of at least three components for its growth and development. They are-

- The desire of a community to share cultural legacy with the tourists.
- An intact cultural resource base that can provide the foundation for a community, cultural heritage product.
- An accessible travel market.

Following are some of the measures for effective development of cultural tourism in Assam

1. Well- Planned Publicity- Intensive campaign should be carried out by government and private agencies both at national and international levels to project the cultural resources of the state.
2. Promotional venture of potential tourism products - Tourism promotional activities of the state should be parallelly supported by promotional venture of potential tourism products like indigenous craft, folk art, performing art, music and other cultural components. Moreover, some long term projects such as the establishment of district cultural museum can also be taken up which could illustrate the history and traditions of a district.
3. Involvement of indigenous people- The policies and programs of tourism development should involve the indigenous people (any ethnic group who inhabits the geographical region with which they have the earliest historic connection) in which potential resources are located as these peoples are nearer to environment in which these are to be developed. They should be made aware of the value of cultural resources in tourism development through education. Bringing them to discuss the relevant problems would greatly assist the policy maker. They could contribute to issues such as organization of cultural activities, reception of tourist, etc.
4. Promotion and renovation of major monuments and ruins – Renovation of monuments and ruin sites should be done to preserve their antique characteristics. All such sites should have provision to display their history and significance to facilitate tourist as well as the locals to rediscover the past.
5. Improved infrastructure – Both the government and private tourism agencies should try to promote infrastructural facilities for tourist to enjoy their stay in the areas of attraction.
6. Socio-political tranquility- The government should see that socio-political rest prevails in the region.

CONCLUSION

Cultural tourism if well planned could be raised to an important income and employment generating sector and could also provide an incentive for increasing cultural awareness and activity and therefore produce a wide range of social benefits too. The indigenous cultural tourism of Assam requires integration of the components, like, the desire of the community to share cultural legacy with the tourists, an intact cultural resource base which could provide the foundation for a community's cultural heritage product and also an accessible travel market for its growth and development.

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