

Economic Prospects of Tourism in Assam

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Abstract : Tourism has become as one of the largest industries in the World today. It is an industry which can easily alter the economic scenario of a country. Although India has a fastest growing tourism industry today, North-East India, an ideal place for tourists, is not lagging behind from the perspective. Tourism is a major industry and plays a vital role in the growth of an economy. Its contributions are primarily related to increase foreign exchange earnings, provide employment opportunities, fair return on investment, and conservation of resources. It offers immense socio economic development potential. This paper studies the various economic prospects of tourism in Assam.

Index Terms - Tourism, North-East India, economic development

1. Introduction:

Tourism has become as one of the largest industries in the World today. It is an industry which can easily alter the economic scenario of a country. Although India has a fastest growing tourism industry today, North-East India, an ideal place for tourists, is not lagging behind from the perspective. Its alluring hills, dazzling rivers, beautiful waterfalls, natural forests, heavy rains during monsoon, diversity of flora and fauna, countless species of wild animals and plants, harmonious folk music, delightful dances and festivals, variety of many delicious dishes, handlooms and handicrafts, and above all its green landscape used to attract people all over the world since time immemorial. Assam being one of the cardinal states amongst the eight Northeastern states of India, is regarded as the gateway of Northeast India which is blessed with ample natural resources in the form of green and mineral reserves, water bodies and flora and fauna and has been at the centre stage of tourist attraction. Even, it is evident from the history 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 state of Assam is best known for her unique natural beauty with flora and fauna, historical monuments, pilgrim centre, tea gardens and its colorful cultural festivals. Thus, Assam is rightly endowed with nature and has the appreciable possibilities for developing into a compelling force if tourism is encouraged as a thriving industry. Although the whole north eastern region has tremendous tourism potential, the tourism industry in the area is still miles to go to exploit the proper potentialities. The tourism in Assam is mainly based on Wildlife, Tea tourism, Historical Monuments Ethnic cultural heritages etc. Therefore, natural parks and sanctuaries, rivers, lakes, warm water springs, forests, wild life, are the principal components of tourist attraction in the state.

2. Objectives:

The objectives of the study are as follows

- To have an idea of tourist inflow in Assam
- To know the role of Tourism in Economic Growth
- To know the various components of Tourism and the problems related to tourism industry.

3. Methodology

This study is based on the secondary data. The data are collected from statistical handbook, Assam Tourism Department, North East Tourism Department, Research Papers and journal papers etc.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Tourist Inflow in Assam

The table 1 reveals that though the inflow of tourists in the state is not so encouraging, it has been gradually increased during the period 2004-2017. The total number of tourists (Domestic & Foreign) visited the state has increased from 22,93,915 in 2004 to 40,66,081 in 2010 and then increased to 59,66,530 in the year 2017. The foreign tourist has also witnessed the increased from 7285 in 2004 to 31,739 in 2017. Thus the flow of tourists to the state is slowly picking up.

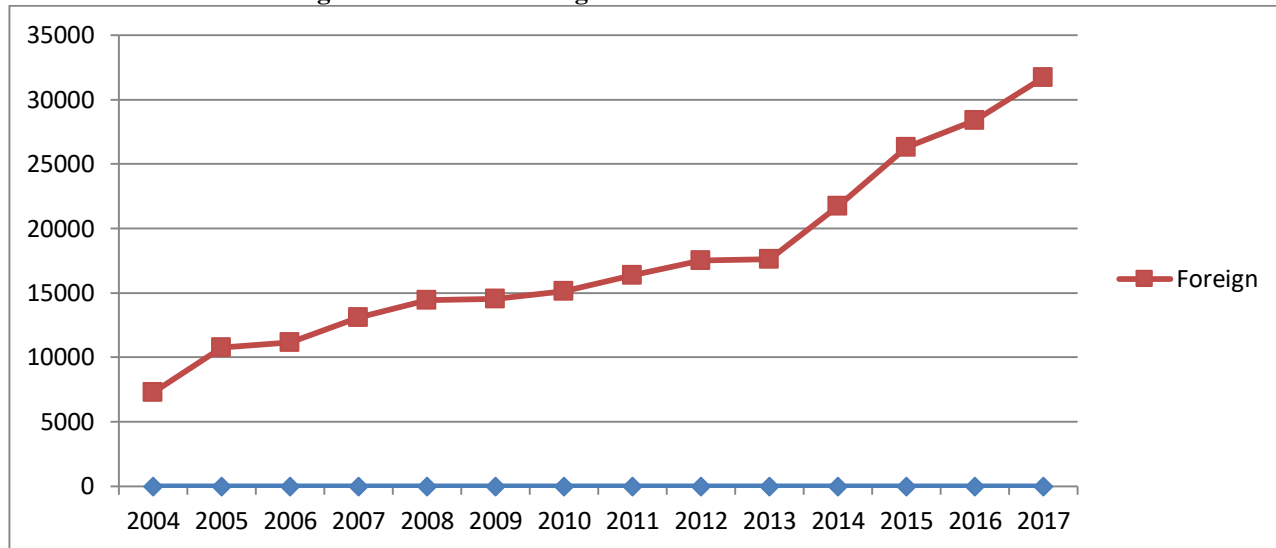
Table 1: Tourist inflow in Assam

Tour	Domestic	Foreign	Total
2004	22,86,630	7285	22,93,915
2005	24,67,656	10,782	24,78,438
2006	32,68,657	11,151	32,79,808
2007	34,36,484	13,105	34,49,589
2008	36,17,306	14,426	36,31,732
2009	39,98,706	14,533	40,13,239
2010	40,50,924	15,157	40,66,081
2011	43,39,485	16,400	43,55,885

2012	45,11,407	17,542	45,28,949
2013	46,84,527	17,638	47,02,165
2014	48,35,492	21,725	48,57,217
2015	56,42,950	26,320	56,69,270
2016	57,13,156	28,419	57,41,575
2017	59,34,791	31,739	59,66,530

Source: Assam Tourism Development website, <http://www.assamtourisonline.com>

Figure 1: Trends of foreign tourist in Assam



4.2. Role of Tourism in Economic Growth

Tourism is a major industry and plays a vital role in the growth of an economy. Its contributions are primarily related to increase foreign exchange earnings, provide employment opportunities, fair return on investment, and conservation of resources. It offers immense socio economic development potential. Tourism is a people oriented industry. It rejuvenates people and gives livelihood to the host people. Tourism is a basic and most desirable human activity which deserves the praise and encouragement of all people and all governments (Rome, 1963). Modern Tourism is closely linked with development and it encompasses a growing number of new destinations. These dynamics have moved tourism into a key-driver for socio-economic progress (United Nations world Tourism organization). The technological advances, development of communication system, better transportation, mainly rail, road and air transportation, marketing and promotional technique etc. had given boost to international as well as domestic tourism.

4.3. Components of Tourism:

The whole tourism potentialities of the state can be grouped together under the following categories: (a) Nature Tourism, (b) Tea tourism (c) Eco Tourism, (d) Cultural Tourism (e) Pilgrim Tourism (f) Golf Tourism and (g) Adventure Tourism (h) Others.

a. Nature Tourism

Assam and its six neighbouring states of the North-East are known for their bio-geographic richness (Coopers and Lybrand Report, 1996, p. 49). With its dense forests, uneven topography, flora and fauna, the majestic Brahmaputra and its tributaries, wild life sanctuaries like Kaziranga, Manas, Pabitora, Dibru-Saikhowa, Bhalukpong, Pabitora and similar others, and many rare species of animals, Assam offers basically nature-centric tourism. From one end to the other, the state offers to the tourists so many places of natural beauty with wide variety of wildlife that very few places in the world can compete with it. Nature tourism understood in terms of wildlife sanctuaries constitutes the core of tourism in Assam. The tourists, both domestic and foreign, are likely to find these places attracting, nay alluring, provided a well-definite programme of action is evolved.

b. Tea Tourism

Tea was first discovered in Assam in 1823 by two intrepid British adventurers, Robert and Charles Bruce and since then tea has become an integral part of Assam's economy. Each of these lush green tea gardens in Assam (about 1000 in number) is a treasure house of exotic beauty of nature with colourful people and their enchanting songs and dances, sprawling bungalows, and residential facilities. Many of these tea gardens have polo fields and golf courses. There are as many as 30 air strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. These facilities can form into an attractive package for tourism. The road communication to most of the tea gardens is fairly well maintained, and the rest houses and bungalows with modern facilities located there are generally kept ready for visitors and guests. Therefore, coordination with the management of the tea gardens can effectively do a lot in promoting tea tourism in the state. It may be noted that tea tourism is a recent concept, its potentiality, remains unexplored.

c. Eco-tourism

Eco-tourism is also a new concept, developed around the idea of travelling to places of natural beauty, moving around and staying with the places of nature for a couple of days. It has the twin objectives of conserving environment and improving the welfare of the local people. Countries like Kenya, Costa Rica, South Africa have already successfully promoted eco-tourism. Kerala presents a unique success story of eco-tourism in our country. On this similar line, Assam has immense scope for eco-tourism, as its natural scenario and climatic condition resemble those in Kerala. The state is virtually free from industrial pollution. Its green forests, blue hills, enchanting rivers are the basis on which an eco-friendly tourism can be developed. For that a host of matters to be properly addressed, including: (a) development of good approach road to the spots of tourist attraction, (b) creation of infra-structural facilities like good quality tents with provisions for food and other logistics, (c) river cruising and water sports, bird watching towers etc. These facilities are likely to attract eco-tourists. It may be noted that eco-tourism is yet to come to the take-off stage.

d. Cultural Tourism

Assam is a conglomeration of various ethnic tribes and groups each having a distinct language, culture, way-of-life, festivals, songs and dances. Most of these people have their spring festivals. Songs and dances, display of colourful dresses, tasting of innumerable varieties of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes mark these festivals. Sankardev Kalakhetra, Guwahati, has been organising, in recent years, spring festivals, on the line of the desert festival of Rajasthan, the Rangali Utsav in the month of April in which the various colourful shades of Assam are presented. This could be as big an attraction as the Pushkar Mela in Rajasthan.

e. Pilgrim Tourism

Assam has many ancient temples and shrines, some of which like Kamakhya date back to pre-historic time. As stated already Kamakhya is one of the most revered religious places in the country. An average of 1000 visitors visit the Kamakhya temple every day throughout the year. It becomes a centre of attraction in the month of June when it celebrates the Ambubchi mela. At that time more than hundred thousand pilgrims come for pilgrimage from different places of India. Situated on a hill top Kamakhya is also a very beautiful place that attracts many tourists. There are other religious places where visitors often come from different parts of the country. But most of the places do not provide adequate facilities to the tourists and pilgrims, for which these places of religious importance fail to attract a large number of tourists.

f. Adventure Tourism

The enchanting blue hills and speedy rivers of Assam provide an enormous scope for the development of adventure tourism. Recently, some of the adventure sports activities like rock-climbing, trekking, para-sailing, water sports, river rafting and angling are promoted by the Department of Tourism. There is an annual angling competition held at Bhalukpong-Potasali side every year in November in which Indian and foreign tourists participate. But other areas of adventure tourism like hang gliding are yet to grow. Assam has a number of ideal places like Nilachal hills (where the Kamakhya temple situated) in the city of Guwahati and the hills around Kaziranga. Since most of the tourists come to the state through Guwahati and visit Kaziranga, there is an enormous scope for hang gliding.

g. Golf Tourism

There are about 10 golf courses located mostly within the compact areas of tea gardens. The Oil India maintains a very good golf course in the industrial town of Duliajan. These offer a unique opportunity to develop golf tourism in the state. Most of the courses are located near to air-strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. In recent years, domestic and foreign tourists are coming to play golf in different golf courses, and a good number of them use these air-strips and helipads. Golf tourism can be integrated with eco and tea tourism. One has to recognize that some tourists may more than one interest and may like to combine various aspects of tourism described above.

4.4. PROBLEMS OF TOURISM IN ASSAM

a. Absence of a Tourism Policy:- 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. Still the state has no any proper tourism policy.

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. Unfortunately, the ghost of RAP still continues to loom large and the efforts to disabuse the false apprehension in the mind of the foreign tourists are minimal.

c. Insurgency:- The problem of insurgency has become the stumbling block in the course of development of Assam. It founded every development strategy and hampered all the development work. Kidnapping, extortion, killing, bandh, strikes, and curfews have become the order of the day. 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.

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:- For proper development of tourism industry, there should be proper coordination among the all agencies related to the industry. Special emphasis should be given on public and private partnership to tap the unexploited potential opportunities. But in Assam, there is no tangible and effective coordination among the agencies associated with the tourism industry.

f. Absence of trained Tourist Guides:- Assam virtually does not have any trained guides 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. But the effort does not yield good result.

5. CONCLUSION

Tourism is a multi- dimensional activity and it covers a large number of economic activities. The spread effect of tourism, therefore, is much wider than any other economic activity. A study by NEDFi found that every domestic tourist creates employment for three persons and every foreign tourist seven persons. It was also estimated that every million rupees invested in tourism, creates 47.9 direct jobs besides many indirect jobs. It is generally believed that tourists, both domestic and foreign, visit different places in search of specialities, which include a variety of things, such as, beauties of nature, architecture, peace of mind and fulfilment in religious places, new and different variety of food, culture of the people and uncommon adventure. In the midst of so many varieties, tourists make certain common demands, and these are- clean, hygienic and comfortable living accommodation, good transport system to take them from one place to another, decent shops particularly catering to ethnic art, entertainment representing cultural heritage of the place etc. Assam becomes a Nationally and Internationally acclaimed all-season Tourist destination for its unique wildlife, bio-diversity and experience of an unexploited wonderland. Tourism is to be one of the main sources of income generation for the people. It will also be a vibrant and significant contributor to the sustainable development of the State of Assam.

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