

COVID - 19 and its impacts on Tourism in Meghalaya, India

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Abstract: Coronavirus collectively known as COVID - 19 affected the health of many people and snatched away the soul of many lives worldwide without any discrimination on rich or poor people. This pandemic which started in China's wet market of Wuhan, sparked and spread like a wild fire to different corner of the earth not only severely affected the public health, but socially, politically and most importantly on economy of every country at present. This paper intends to write particularly on how this deadly virus crept in the land and suddenly looted the economy contributed by Tourism industry in Meghalaya (India), one of the most famous tourist states in North East India and even in the world and how this pandemic affected the socio – economic life of the people who generated their income from tourism sectors.

Key words: Coronavirus, pandemic, impact, tourist industry, Meghalaya, caves.

Introduction: A novel Coronavirus disease or COVID - 19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus emerged from sea market in Wuhan city of Hubei province of China in the month of December, 2019 by health authorities in Wuhan city of the People's Republic of China. In 1968, the journal **Nature** reported that it is called "Coronavirus" because these viruses are members of a previously unrecognized family of viruses which can be identify only in the electron microscope and so got their name by way of looking under the microscope which resemble to an image of the crown (the word "Corona" means "crown" in Latin). Coronavirus belong to a large family of viruses which can cause illness varying from common cold to the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS – CoV -2). The name Coronavirus is chosen because the virus is genetically related to the coronavirus responsible for the SARS outbreak in 2003. The World Health Organization (WHO) announced this disease as COVID – 19 on 11th February 2020. Infected patient from this virus shows sign or symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath, breathing difficulties, fatigue, and Sore throat. The virus gets entry into the human body through the droplet transmission from infected person. This disease transmitted from human to human through large respiratory droplets and direct or indirect contact with infected secretions.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this paper is observational and analytical form of approach and is based on primary and secondary sources. A primary source includes a brief story by the WHO and Health Department of the state, interviews etc. Secondary data included published works such as books, articles contained in journals, newspapers, etc.

World scenario consequences of COVID - 19 in Tourist Industry

Therefore, as China served as one of the most popular and attractive hubs of tourist spots in the world especially in winter seasons where travellers from different nations visited China not only for their business meetings and works but to spend their winter vacations and witness the nature beauties of all over China. However, it turned to be very unfortunate for people who visited China in late 2019 as they carried back home with a deadly virus in their body unknowingly and transmitted to others who came in contact with them in their journeys and spreading very fast to even corners of nearly every country of the world.

The World Health Organization declared COVID - 19 as pandemic on 11th March 2020 as no exact medicine found so far to cure from this very fast – spreading disease and instead suggested different nations to impose complete lockdown for some days to curbed the spread of the virus and told the people to care and follow precautions for themselves in their daily life. But still this strange virus still infected many rich and poor people of most countries. The widespread of this disease caused the death of people as much as 929K worldwide by 11th September 2020. The most affected countries of the world include USA, India, Brazil, Russia, and Spain Italy. This crisis created havoc and affected the Tourism industry to each and every country of the world. The **World Tourism Organization** reported the loss of revenue during this pandemic. The complete lockdown imposed in respond to the plague led to a 98% fall in international tourist numbers in the month of May when compared to the year 2019. It also reported that about 56% year – on – year drop in tourist arrivals between January and May. This translate into a fall of 300 million tourists and US \$320 billion lost in international tourism receipt which is three times lost during the **Global Economic Crisis 2009**.

COVID – 19, consequences on India’s Tourism Industry

In India, at first it was found that only 26 people got infected after travelling internationally. As prescribed by WHO, Indian government also took a serious note on Coronavirus pandemic by imposing immediate complete lockdown nationwide by 25th March 2020 and later open with strictly rules and regulations to be followed by all citizens. However, the active case from this virus is still rising and cannot be stopped easily. It took around 8 months (February to September) and the death toll is 80,776 as on 15th September 2020. India is now the second worst - hit nation by the Pandemic after United States of America. According to

Johns Hopkins University, which maintained the data of COVID - 19 from all over the world, India's death toll is the third – worst.

This pandemic really plundered the wealth of the nation. The economic flow of the country from different direction is running low. The Tourist department which used to contribute to the developing economy of the country of about 5.06% of India's Gross Domestic Product (**GDP**) during 2016 - 2017 now was adversely affected. Most of the famous attractive tourist spots were totally locked up. The flow of income from this industry has stopped constantly. The Indian Tourist Industry employed 8.75 crore people such as in hospitality and hotel management, guests house and homestay owners, drivers and tour guides etc. The Federation of Associations of Tourism and hospitality industry estimated the loss of Rs10 lakhs crore due to COVID - 19 pandemic. This also creates another economic crisis and unemployment among citizens of India and a great loss to the government.

COVID - 19 consequences in North East India's tourism industry

Northeast India which comprise of 8 states had undergoes on paths of trouble and difficulties in times of COVID - 19 pandemic. As soon as the central government of India gave high alert on the danger and spread of the virus, all respective governments of each took initiatives measures to protect the people from risks and danger. All state borders were closed, Interstate movement has stopped and commercial trade centres were locked down completely. The only chaos was to stay home in order to safeguards their own health, and going out except on emergency calls. The economies of every state sink down below the actual position. The North East state of Sikkim which was known for its natural beauties and wild life varieties which has attracted as many as 20 million tourists in a year was economically seriously affected as this state rely its economy heavily on tourism.

Profile of Meghalaya

Meghalaya, one among the 8 states of North East India, hugged by Assam state from North, East and western part and by Bangladesh International Border in the South. Situated between 26° 9'30" and 25°08' 28" north latitude and between 91° 9' 0" and 92° 51' 30" east longitude, It has the area of only 22,429 square kilometers with a total population of 2,966,889 according to the Census of the year 2011 and 14,262 sq. km in area. The inhabitants of this land include the tribal groups of Khasi - Jaintias, the Garos, the Hajong, the Rabha and others. These main tribes are matrilineal society.

Meghalaya was given with different names as the "**Scotland of the East**" and the "**Abode of clouds**" by foreigners during the colonial era. It was also well known as one of the famous **Hill Station** for the British in summer seasons especially during the early 19th century. This state has lots of similarities with Scotland's

nature and climate. Nangtyngshain Hoojon (2020) summarized that Meghalaya's villages of Mawsynram and Cherapunjee (Sohra) has for many years hold the World Record of the “**wettest place on earth**” as they experience heavy rainfall and humid climate embellished with white clouds and fogs in all seasons of the year. The location as well as the charming climate conditions of the state itself, attracted many spelunkers and tourists to witness and experienced the stunning and beautiful nature of the state.

Meghalaya, besides its cool climate and its dazzling vistas and rich traditions, has also richly blessed and endowed with the gift of nature which continued to draw attention on peoples around the world to visit this paradise land. Each season of the year is the best time to visit for tourist. It has varieties and different tourist spots all around the state. Mawlynnong village attracted my visitor as for many years it holds as the “**cleanest village in Asia**”. Recently it was found that around 1300 caves discovered so far and many more needs to be explored and discover in the length and breadth of its southern part bordering Bangladesh. It can be mention that the longest caves in India such as Krem Liat Prah, krem Kotsoti, Krem Chympa, Siju cave in Garo Hills, etc. are found in Meghalaya as well as around 20 deepest caves in India were located in Meghalaya. Apart from; there are others spots of sparkling waterfalls and clear rivers, eco - parks, many doubled – decker Living root Bridges, beautiful rock mountains and lush green valleys, Dams and museums, etc. which lured spelunkers, adventurers, tourists and visitor to explore and witness the natural glamorous beauty of the land.

No doubt it cannot hide that; as in other places of different nations, tourism industry contributed much to the economy of the state of Meghalaya in many ways. It generated incomes from revenue, it served as the channel of employments and opportunities to many educated youths and women. Businessmen ran their business much better, indigenous arts and crafts were exported through tourism department. Traditional and cultural dresses and attires, arts and crafts (which served as local identity) were displayed in most of the shops in the tourist spots. Local owners and employees of homestays, restaurants, tourist vehicles, etc. and most importantly, the street vendors and daily earn wages groups gained benefit from tourism industry.

Impact of COVID - 19 on tourism department in Meghalaya

While people welcoming the New - Year 2020 with joys and happiness, a full expectations and positive plans for their future, and then suddenly something disastrous was going to make an entry to the state. After the Coronavirus spread very fast to different parts of India, a national and uniform lockdown was imposed by the Indian government on 25th March 2020 which extended for months to fight and stop the spread of invisible monster coronavirus. The state of Meghalaya too, under the leadership of Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, followed the rules and regulations of the central government. No man is allowed to step outside for unnecessary things. However, in the middle of fighting, on 14th April 2020 one patient was tested COVID - 19 positive and died the next morning of 15th April 2020. This really creates a chaos of confusions and mental depression on many local people which led the state government to further strict the movement of

people in and around the land and even punished those who violate the rules and regulations under Pandemic Act. All men, rich or poor, haves or have not, have to stay and work from home. Besides closing borders, commercial center, currently; all tourist spots were totally closed. Meghalaya while facing its lockdown to curve the spread of the virus has gradually went down with her economy. With the streets are empty, well known tourism places are left deserted causing the street vendors, shopkeepers, vegetables sellers have face serious consequences with no place to perform their economic functions especially those less opportunities people who earn from hand to mouth. This placed thousands of people's livelihoods at risk.

The tourism department in Meghalaya is badly affected amid Coronavirus pandemic. It has a huge impact on the state as a whole. It was for the first time in so many years that Meghalaya undergone such a drop in footfall of tourist as this state seems to be buzzing with tourists throughout the year irrespective of any kind of internal crisis. However, now nearly 6 months all tourist spots, lodges and guest houses, restaurants and hotels wear a deserted look due to the pandemic crisis. No wonder it cause the financial distress on owners of resorts, restaurants homestay tourist vehicles etc. that have financed their assets through debts, and would find themselves at the edge of insolvency. Through interviews with stakeholders and manager of Tourist spots expressed their low feelings and experiencing economic loss due to decrease in number of tourists. But despite the facts, the government of Meghalaya had no choice but advised outsider tourists to better not make any travel plans to Meghalaya. Most of the people are not even willing to visit the city due to fear of COVID - 19 diseases.

Conclusion

Tourist department in Meghalaya had undergone a serious phase of drawbacks and low income from 2019 onwards. Already disturbed by many protests organized by the local people on the issue of Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) which was passed by the Parliament of India on 11th December 2019, later well - known as Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and which came into effective on 10th January 2020. The problem of the state is multiplied. While these oppositions and Anti - CAA movements as well as a demanding to implement Inner Line Permit (ILP) in the state are still at peak, it was followed by a long period of lockdown to protect from the community spread of Coronavirus. The whole state itself was in a critical condition and further added with a new challenge to tackle the world plague of deadly disease. Even though this pandemic is still going on and new cases detected every day, the outbreak of Coronavirus or COVID - 19, can be seen that it affected all states in India and Meghalaya in particular, witnessed the decline contribution of tourism to the economy of the land. It caused every fortune to experience an interruption of the routine business of people in Meghalaya. And it appears the worst is yet to come. Until and unless the vaccine to cure this deadly disease is discovered and available globally, it is difficult to

resume back to normal life. Foreign and local people are bothering to plan a visit and still did not have the courage to travel and make a visit to different tourist spots in Meghalaya. The current crisis continues to affect travel and tourism businesses of all size.

Recently, the government of Meghalaya scheduled a meeting to discuss on the issue to encourage and boost tourism in Meghalaya in order to promote the economy of the state and arrived at the conclusion that tourist spots will be open slowly and slowly based on observation on the situation in the state. It was decided that three minor spots to be open which include the Wards Lake located in the heart of the city of Shillong, Nehru Park located in Damsite (Barapani), Ribhoi District and Elephant falls in Upper Shillong. Tourists who pay visit to these places are directed to follow the rules and protocols provided by the Health Department to maintain social distancing of at least 1 meter. They should avoid shaking hands and learnt to greet people by bowing heads or doing *Namaste*. Covering their mouth with masks is a must and should sanitize and rub their hands with hand sanitizers every time. However, people are not yet excited to visit parks and falls as most of them wanted to keep health at their top priority.

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