

NA-PUKHURI AND BEYOND: UNVEILING TINSUKIA'S HERITAGE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *Tourism is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for economic growth, cultural preservation, and social development. Among the various forms of tourism, cultural and heritage tourism has emerged as a significant sector, especially in regions rich in historical and cultural resources. It involves traveling to experience the places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. This form of tourism not only fosters cross-cultural understanding but also contributes directly to local and national economies.*

Tinsukia's historical significance is evident from its ancient tanks (ponds), the remnants of its royal past, and its role as a former capital. One of the most prominent among these tanks is Na-Pukhuri, meaning "Set of Nine Ponds." Dug under the direction of King Sarbananda Singha, Na Pukhuri is not only a source of water but a historical symbol reflecting the town's architectural and cultural heritage. Even today, it serves as a central landmark in Tinsukia, surrounded by administrative offices, cultural institutions, and public spaces, making it a site of both historical and contemporary relevance.

Despite this rich heritage, the town's tourism potential remains underutilized. This study seeks to examine the prospects and challenges of tourism development in Tinsukia, focusing particularly on the heritage of the Matak Kingdom. The study is timely and relevant and aims to explore Na-Pukhuri's historical and cultural significance, assess its current condition and tourism potential, identify preservation challenges, and propose sustainable development strategies to promote it as a heritage tourism site, enhancing local economic growth and cultural awareness in Tinsukia. This study uses a mixed-methods approach with descriptive and exploratory design, focusing on Tinsukia's heritage tourism. Primary data include field observations, interviews, and surveys of locals and tourists. Secondary data involve literature, reports, and statistics on the Matak Kingdom and regional tourism trends.

Key Words: Cultural Tourism, heritage, historical importance, Matak, indigenous, poverty.

1.1 Introduction

Tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing sectors in the global economy, serving as a catalyst for economic development, cultural exchange, and community empowerment. Among the various forms of tourism, cultural and heritage tourism holds a special place, especially in regions endowed with rich histories, diverse traditions, and unique cultural identities. This form of tourism involves travel motivated by an interest in the historical, artistic, scientific, or lifestyle elements of a destination. It allows travelers to engage deeply with the cultural landscape of a place—its monuments, rituals, languages, art forms, architecture, and living traditions—thus contributing not only to the preservation of heritage but also to the socio-economic well-being of local communities.

In India, a land of immense cultural and historical wealth, heritage tourism has long been recognized as a key component of the tourism sector. Over recent years, North-East India known for its natural beauty, ethnic diversity, and historical legacy—has begun to draw greater attention as a promising destination for heritage-based tourism. The region's rich tapestry of indigenous cultures, ancient kingdoms, religious traditions, and colonial imprints offers tremendous scope for heritage tourism that is both authentic and impactful.

Within this broader regional context, the town of Tinsukia in Assam—formerly known as Bengmara, stands out as a historically significant location with untapped tourism potential. Tinsukia was the capital of the Matak Kingdom, established by King Sarbananda Singha, a visionary leader who played a pivotal role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of the region during the late 18th century. Initially, the capital was situated at Rongagarh, but in 1791, Sarbananda Singha shifted it to Bengmara (present-day Tinsukia), transforming it into a center of administration and cultural activity.

A hallmark of his reign was the construction of numerous tanks (locally called pukhuris), which served both utilitarian and symbolic purposes. Among them, Na-Pukhuri, meaning "Set of Nine Ponds," holds a place of particular importance. Dug under the king's supervision, Na Pukhuri today stands as a living monument of the town's historical legacy. Surrounded by government offices, cultural landmarks, and public institutions, it remains an integral part of Tinsukia's urban identity. The preservation and promotion of such sites could play a vital role in shaping Tinsukia as a heritage tourism destination.

Despite these cultural and historical assets, Tinsukia's potential remains largely underexplored in mainstream tourism circuits. Issues such as lack of awareness, inadequate infrastructure, and poor site management have hindered the development of a sustainable tourism framework. Given this context, the present study aims to explore the prospects and challenges of heritage tourism in Tinsukia with a specific focus on the legacy of the Matak Kingdom. The study will also seek to propose strategic recommendations for promoting tourism in the region through better planning, conservation efforts, and community participation.

By shedding light on the historical treasures of Tinsukia and evaluating its tourism readiness, the study hopes to contribute to a broader understanding of how heritage tourism can serve as a vehicle for regional development and cultural revival in lesser-known parts of India.

1.2 Na-Pukhuri:

Na-Pukhuri is a historical pond located in Tinsukia, Assam. It is a cluster of nine ponds. In the year 1788 A.D. after the Moamaria uprising that the powerful leader of the rebellion Mezera pro-claiming independence established the Matak Kingdom with its first capital at 'Rongagara' on the bank of river Dibru. After that he took the name of Sarbananda Singha. After three years of his reign the capital was shifted to 'Bengmora' the present headquarter of Tinsukia District in the year 1791.

1.3 Objectives of the Study:

To explore the historical and cultural significance of Na-Pukhuri as a central heritage site of the Matak Kingdom in Tinsukia.

To assess the present condition, tourism potential, and challenges associated with the preservation and promotion of Na-Pukhuri.

To propose strategies for the sustainable development of Na Pukhuri as a heritage tourism attraction that can contribute to the local economy and cultural awareness.

1.4 Significance of the study

This study holds significant value as it focuses on Na-Pukhuri, one of the most prominent historical landmarks in Tinsukia, associated with the legacy of the Matak Kingdom and King Sarbananda Singha. Despite its cultural and historical importance, Na Pukhuri remains underrepresented in tourism development plans. By highlighting its heritage value and current condition, the study aims to raise awareness among policymakers, researchers, and the local community about its potential as a heritage tourism site. Promoting Na Pukhuri can not only preserve a vital piece of Assam's history but also contribute to economic growth through increased tourist footfall. The study will provide meaningful insights and recommendations for sustainable tourism strategies, integrating historical preservation with community participation. In doing so, it aspires to serve as a model for heritage site management in other parts of North-East India.

King Sarbananda Singha of the Matak Kingdom showed his kindness by having 24 tanks dug in different places. The biggest of these is Na-Pukhuri, which means a group of nine ponds. It was made in 1972 A.D. This tank covers an area of around 11.75 acres and filled with natural water, which is why it is called a lake. To make this historical place more attractive the Tinsukia District Administration planned to turn it into a tourist spot and amusement park. They built a 400 meter tiled path and a 1200 meter jogging track. Many play items have also been installed for children. Visitors can also see the old structures from the late 1700s, built during the time of the Matak Kingdom.

1.4 Methodology of the Study

This study employs a **mixed-methods approach**, combining both **qualitative and quantitative research methods** to provide a comprehensive understanding of the heritage tourism potential in Tinsukia, Assam.

The research adopts a **descriptive and exploratory design**. The descriptive aspect aims to document existing heritage sites and tourism infrastructure, while the exploratory component investigates the untapped potential, perceptions, and strategic possibilities for tourism development in the region.

The geographical focus of the study is the town of **Tinsukia** in Assam, with emphasis on culturally significant sites such as **Na-Pukhuri** and other remnants of the Matak Kingdom. The study also includes the surrounding areas that may contribute to or benefit from heritage tourism.

1.5 Methods of Data Collection

a) Primary Data Collection

Field Observation: Direct on-site observations of heritage locations (e.g., Na-Pukhuri) to assess their condition, accessibility, visitor facilities, and historical features.

Structured Interviews: Interviews with key stakeholders such as:

- Local historians and cultural experts
- Tourism department officials
- Local community leaders
- Business owners (hotels, travel agents, etc.)
- Visitors and tourists

Questionnaire Survey: A structured questionnaire will be administered to:

- Local residents to gauge awareness and perception of heritage tourism
- Tourists to assess their experiences, preferences, and satisfaction levels

b) Secondary Data Collection

Review of existing literature, government tourism reports, heritage conservation documents, and archival sources related to the Matak Kingdom and Tinsukia's historical background.

Statistical data from tourism departments, local municipalities, and census reports to analyze visitor trends and socio-economic conditions.

1.6 Limitation of the study

The study may be constrained by limited access to archival records or unavailability of updated tourism data. Seasonal variations in tourist inflow may affect survey outcomes.

2.1 Findings:

The study was conducted with the aim of exploring the heritage and tourism potential of Na-Pukhuri in Tinsukia, Assam, by examining its historical significance, current condition, and future prospects. The findings are presented below in alignment with the objectives of the research:

i) Historical and Cultural Significance of Na Pukhuri

Na-Pukhuri, meaning "Set of Nine Ponds," is a historical landmark situated in the heart of Tinsukia town. It was excavated during the reign of **King Sarbananda Singha**, the founder of the **Matak Kingdom**, after he moved the capital from Ronggarh to Bengmara (now Tinsukia) in 1791. These ponds were not only meant for water storage and daily utility but also symbolized royal authority and civic planning during that period.

Among the nine ponds, the central tank known today as Na-Pukhuri still exists as a major feature in the town's landscape. It has been a part of Tinsukia's identity for centuries and continues to be surrounded by administrative buildings, schools, public parks, and cultural institutions. This location reflects a blend of historical depth and contemporary urban relevance. Interviews with local residents and historians revealed that Na-Pukhuri once served religious, social, and political purposes, being a place for community gatherings, rituals, and royal events.

The study finds that Na-Pukhuri is not just a water body but a living cultural asset, embodying the legacy of the Matak Kingdom. However, the broader historical narrative of this site is poorly documented and underappreciated in mainstream tourism literature and promotional platforms.

ii) Current Condition, Tourism Potential, and Challenges

Despite its historical importance, Na-Pukhuri is not currently recognized as a major tourism destination. Field observations and community feedback highlighted a number of pressing concerns:

iii) Neglect and Lack of Maintenance:

The pond and its surroundings suffer from poor upkeep. Encroachments, waste dumping, and algae growth are common, which diminish the visual and environmental quality of the site.

iv) Limited Awareness and Promotion:

There is very little information available for tourists about the history or significance of Na-Pukhuri. The site lacks signage, brochures, or digital documentation that could inform visitors and students about its background.

v) Urban Pressure:

Being located in the town's center, Na-Pukhuri is under constant pressure from urban development. Modern construction around the area has altered its original landscape, further distancing it from its historic roots.

vi) Unplanned Use of Space:

While the adjacent park serves recreational purposes for local people, there is no structured effort to incorporate the heritage value of the site into its usage.

However, the site holds immense potential for cultural tourism due to several factors:

vii) Centrally Located Heritage Site

Na-Pukhuri is located at the heart of Tinsukia town, making it easily accessible to locals and tourists alike. Its strategic position near government offices, educational institutions, and public amenities makes it an ideal spot for heritage-based tourism development.

viii) Connection to the Matak Kingdom

The pond is one of the most prominent remnants of the Matak Kingdom, which holds immense historical significance in Assam's political and cultural evolution. Promoting the site can bring greater attention to the legacy of King Sarbananda Singha and the cultural identity of the Matak community.

ix) Scope for Cultural Tourism

Na-Pukhuri can serve as a venue for traditional cultural performances, folk festivals, and exhibitions showcasing Matak culture, traditional dress, cuisine, and handicrafts. This can create immersive experiences for tourists and help preserve local traditions.

x) Educational and Research Value

The site has strong potential as a center for heritage education. Schools and colleges can organize heritage walks, history projects, and guided tours around Na-Pukhuri to educate students about local history. It can also attract researchers and historians for studies on regional kingdoms and water management systems.

xi) Integration into Heritage Circuits

Na-Pukhuri can be promoted as part of a broader heritage trail in Upper Assam that includes places like Sadiya, Rangghar (in Sivasagar), and the tea garden heritage sites. This will increase footfall and provide a thematic narrative for tourists exploring Assam's past.

xii) Development as a Heritage Park

With thoughtful planning, the area surrounding Na-Pukhuri could be developed into a full-fledged heritage park, complete with sculptures, plaques, and a heritage interpretation center. This would enhance its aesthetic and educational appeal.

xiii) Community-Based Tourism

Engaging local communities, especially youth groups and artisans—in maintaining and promoting the site could lead to employment opportunities and a sense of ownership. Community-led souvenir shops, tea stalls, and tour guides can enhance the visitor experience while supporting the local economy.

xiv) Nature and Leisure Tourism

As a water body surrounded by greenery, Na-Pukhuri also holds value for eco-friendly and leisure tourism. Bird watching, morning walks, boating (if feasible), and a clean picnic area can attract families and tourists seeking calm and scenic environments.

xv) Potential Venue for Cultural Festivals

Annual heritage or local cultural festivals themed around the Matak era can be hosted in or near the Na-Pukhuri premises. These festivals can include music, dance, storytelling, and local cuisine, drawing both domestic and international tourists.

xvi) Photographic and Visual Appeal

The site, if beautified and maintained, can become a favorite spot for photography enthusiasts, travel bloggers, and documentary filmmakers. Aesthetically enhanced landscapes with interpretive signage and lighting can improve its visual charm.

xvii) Promotion through Digital Platforms

There is great potential to promote Na-Pukhuri through digital media such as travel blogs, virtual tours, YouTube documentaries, Instagram travel pages, and tourism websites. QR-coded information boards can link tourists to online content in multiple languages.

xviii) Link to Eco-Historical Tourism

Combining heritage tourism with environmental conservation efforts can create a unique eco-historical tourism model. Preservation of water quality, plantation drives around the pond, and eco-awareness campaigns can make the site an example of sustainable tourism.

xix) Involvement of Government and NGOs

Collaboration with Assam Tourism, local NGOs, and heritage conservation bodies can bring in the technical and financial support needed for long-term development. Public-private partnerships can also be explored.

xx) Potential for Revenue Generation

Once developed and marketed, the site can generate revenue through entry fees, guided tours, cultural programs, local products, and tourism services. These funds can be reinvested in site maintenance and local welfare.

2.2 Strategies for Sustainable Tourism Development of Na Pukhuri

Based on the analysis of the above findings, the study suggests several practical and sustainable strategies for developing Na-Pukhuri as a heritage tourism site:

i) Heritage Restoration and Conservation:

Immediate steps should be taken to restore the pond's physical environment through desalting, cleaning, and landscaping. Boundary protection and ecological conservation are necessary to preserve the site's integrity.

ii) Historical Documentation and Interpretation:

A comprehensive documentation of Na-Pukhuri's history should be undertaken. Informational boards, guided walks, and brochures can help share the story of the Matak Kingdom with visitors.

iii) Community Engagement:

Local schools, colleges, and cultural bodies can be involved in activities such as heritage walks, exhibitions, and storytelling sessions centered on Na Pukhuri.

iv) Tourism Infrastructure Development:

Basic amenities such as seating areas, waste bins, lighting, and pathways around the pond should be improved. A small heritage interpretation center or museum nearby could serve as a focal point for visitors.

v) Inclusion in Assam Tourism Circuits:

The Assam Tourism Department should recognize Na Pukhuri as a heritage destination and include it in official tourism circuits, festivals, and promotional campaigns.

vi) Digital Promotion:

A dedicated webpage or mobile app section detailing the history of Na Pukhuri, with virtual tours and archival materials, can attract younger audiences and researchers.

3.1 Conclusion of Findings

The study concludes that Na Pukhuri possesses immense, yet largely untapped, potential as a site of historical, cultural, and ecological significance. As a key remnant of the Matak Kingdom and the reign of King Sarbananda Singha, Na-Pukhuri is not just a water body but a living testimony to Tinsukia's rich heritage. Its central location, historical value, and cultural associations make it an ideal focal point for heritage tourism development in the region.

However, the site currently suffers from neglect, lack of awareness, and insufficient infrastructure. Through strategic planning, community engagement, and governmental support, Na Pukhuri can be developed into a cultural tourism hub that educates visitors, celebrates Matak history, and promotes local pride. Efforts such as conservation, heritage interpretation, cultural events, and integration into tourism circuits can transform the site into a vibrant destination.

The revival of Na-Pukhuri as a heritage site will not only help preserve a significant part of Assam's history but also contribute to local economic growth, job creation, and cultural revitalization. The study highlights the urgent need to recognize and develop such historical assets to ensure they benefit both current and future generations.

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