TOURISM POTENTIALITY & INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING IN NORTH EAST INDIA: PRESENT STATUS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Anjan Kumar Bordoloi*1, Binod Kr. Agarwal2

1Ph.D Research Scholar, Dept. of Commerce, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, India.

2Assoc. Prof, Dept. of Commerce, Margherita College, Margheria, Tinsukia, Assam, India.

ABSTRACT

Tourism is an economic activity of immense global importance. Perhaps there is hardly any other field of activity where so many people are involved directly or indirectly. Needless to say, tourism has found a niche for itself as a very effective instrument for generating employment and earning foreign exchange thereby facilitating overall development. Sustainable tourism industry contributing sustainability towards the regional domestic products, helping positively in improving quality of life and taking an important part in overall economic, social as well cultural development of the region The Vision 2020 document released in 2008 for the North-Eastern Region earmarks infrastructure led tourism development as one of the primary hopefuls for revenue generation. Although India is touted to be one of the ten top tourist destinations of the world, but the North-East plays a negligible role in the overall percentage of tourist arrivals in India, constituting one percent. A number of problems beset the region which tends to impede progress of any kind. For this, we should build and maintain an image of a destination of moderate cost and modest infrastructure but extremely rich in experience in terms of hospitality and touristic exposure. The paper highlights the Tourism Potentialities in North East India along with its infrastructural standing in the light of Vision 2020 and develops a road map to promote improved socio-economic relations with South-East Asian countries.

Keywords: Tourism, North East India, Status.

PRELUDE

Tourism is an economic activity of immense global importance. Perhaps there is hardly any field of activity where so many people are involved directly or indirectly. Needless to say, tourism has found a niche for itself as a very effective instrument for generating employment and earning foreign exchange thereby facilitating overall development. Tourism has been the fastest growing largest industry in the world in the past 50 years. Liberalization has brought Indian economy much closer to the International economic scene-creating the right backdrop for the growth of tourism.

In a country of diversities like India, each state has its own attractions in abundance to develop tourism. But it is necessary for each state to move forward with clear aims and
programmes to help India realize its tourism potential to the fullest. It provides 6-7 per cent of the world’s total jobs directly and millions more indirectly through the multiplier effect as per the UN’s World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

As per the working strategy for the 12th Five Year Plan, the Ministry of Tourism has adopted a ‘pro-poor tourism’ approach which could contribute significantly to poverty reduction. More than half of Tourism Ministry’s Plan budget is channelized for funding the development of destinations, circuits, mega projects as also for rural tourism infrastructure projects.

The North-East has a wide array of products in the form of its pristine natural beauty, forests and wildlife, rivers and mountains, and a unique multi-ethnic cultural heritage to offer to the tourist. In order to develop and promote tourism in the region, Ministry of Tourism time to time has organized the International Tourism Mart with the objective of showcasing the largely untapped tourism potential of the North East region in the domestic and international markets.

TYPICAL NORTH-EAST

North East of India, popularly known as N.E., comprises of the eight States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim and geographically situated in the North East corner of India, at Latitude 21.57° N - 29.30° N and Longitude 88° E - 97.30° E with an area of 25.5 million Sq. Km (7.8% of the land mass of the country). N.E. shares the International boundaries of India with China to the North, Bangladesh to the South-West, Bhutan and Nepal to the North-West and Myanmar to the East. This region is connected with the rest of India only through a narrow corridor in North Bengal, known as Chicken Neck, having an approximate width of 33 km on the eastern side and 21 km on the western side. About 70% of N.E. regions are hilly, and the topography varies within each state. Mountains and hills cover most of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya and about half of Tripura, 20% of Assam, 90% of Manipur and almost entire Sikkim.

The plains of the region are mainly made up of separate landmasses - the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley in Assam and the Tripura plains in the South. The Brahmaputra Valley stretches longitudinally for about 730 km, from North Lakhimpur to Dhubri districts in Assam. The Barak Valley, formed by the river Barak and its tributaries covers the districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi of South Assam. In Manipur, the valley is small, comprising only about 10% of the total area of the State. The Tripura plain is an extension of the Ganga-Brahmaputra plain. The topography of the hills is generally rugged and vast areas are inaccessible. The flora and fauna of this region is numerous and varied. N.E. is regarded as one of the most bio-diverse regions of the world (hottest hotspots) (Myers, 2000). Hill ranges forming part of the Himalayas guard the northern side of the region. These unique and varied natures of the region make it one of the most beautiful geographical regions of the country ready to be explored by the tourists of different tastes and habits. Thus North East of India has a tremendous scope for tourism possibilities specifically in the areas of Eco-Tourism, Cultural Tourism and Heritage Tourism. So there lies tremendous possibility for Entrepreneurship Development which will undoubtedly brings prosperity to the region. As
Entrepreneurship Development will improve the social mind set and will lead to betterment of Socio-Economic status of the people.

**PAPER OBJECTIVE**

The paper highlights the Tourism Potentialities in North East India along with its infrastructural standing in the light of Vision-2020 and develops a road map to promote improved socio-economic relations with South-East Asian countries.

**METHODOLOGY**

The paper is based upon the secondary information in the context of ‘Tourism Development in North-East’ and ‘Vision Document 2020’, and the sources includes Annual Reports of Govt. Agencies, journals, magazines, periodicals, books, seminar proceedings, published research articles and website sources.

**THE PROPOSED VISION**

“Sustainable tourism industry contributing substantially towards the regional Domestic Products, helping positively in improving quality of life and taking an important part in overall economic, social, as well as cultural development of the region. For this it is important to build and maintain an image of a destination of moderate cost and modest infrastructure but very rich in experience in terms of hospitality and touristic exposure.”

**INDIA’S NORTH EAST – A PARADISE UNEXPLORED**

The virtues of the NE region can be summarized with the following sentences.

- It is virgin.
- A unique tropical paradise of more than 150 tribes.
- A salubrious climate throughout the year.
- Polite and hospitable people.
- A heritage that is maintained religiously and lived.
- A diverse Eco-System -- as diverse as only seven regions throughout the globe.
- Satellite and other electronic communication including that of air and surface communication improving progressively.

**INDIA’S NORTH-EAST- THE DRIVING FORCES**

- **Strategic Location**
  The North East region of India is a rugged territory consisting of 2,25,000 Sq kms of hills and plains located between Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar with 4,500Kms of International Border. There is, therefore an extra incentive for India to utilize this strategic space in the nation’s interest and the interest of the region’s inhabitants.

- **Natural Resources**
  The North-East is one of the most picturesque regions of India. Its Hills, rivers and Valleys are a tourist paradise. The region’s natural resources like oil, tea and agricultural goods are
exported in large quantities. Mineral resources like coal in Assam and uranium in Meghalaya can also serve the Country’s interest.

- **Cultural heritage**
  The North-East is a home of more than 220 different tribes and communities. Various Sub-Tribes enrich the region with a fascinating array of cultures, festivities, tradition and ethnography. For instance, ethnographic studies on the Nagas are being extensively conducted in Europe and a large number of people are attracted to European museums showcasing Naga cultural heritage.

- **Diaspora**
  The North-East diaspora is gradually increasing in Australia, Europe and North America. Most of the migrant workers from the North-East are also going to South East-Asia. The region can gain a lot from this community.

**EXPLORING TOURISM STATUS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA:**

The Vision document-2020 released by our former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in 2008 for the North-Eastern region earmarks infrastructure-led tourism development as one of the primary hopefuuls for revenue generation. Although India is touted to be one of the ten top tourist destinations of the world though North-East plays a negligible role in the overall percentage of tourist arrivals in India, constituting one percent (1%). This brief focuses on government initiatives, whether real or symbolic, and addresses the key challenges for their failure to deliver. A number of problems beset the region which tends to impede progress of any kind.

Of these are **Tourism marketing strategies, infrastructure developments and security** and **administrative issues**.

- **Marketing & Publicity: Understanding the Problematique**

  This has two aspects national and international both of which work within the umbrella of the region’s forward and backward linkages. South-East Asia holds great prospects for the North-East as a market and vice versa within the ambits of the Indian ever popular Look East Policy (LEP) and the Vision 2020 document, which deals with the international facet of tourism promotion. **Southeast Asia or Southeastern Asia** is a sub-region of Asia, consisting of the countries that are geographically south of China, east of India, west of New Guinea and north of Australia. The region lies on the intersection of geological plates, with heavy seismic and volcanic activity. Southeast Asia consists of two geographic regions: **Mainland Southeast Asia**, also known as Indo-china, comprising Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Vietnam; and **Maritime Southeast Asia**, comprising Brunei, Malaysia, East Timor, Indonesia, Philippines, and Singapore. Developing backward tourism connectivity with other parts of India is as important an element of strides in tourism as developing links with Southeast Asian countries, which answers to the national aspect. **For this reason, it is important to recognize tourism as a promising revenue generator.** Publicizing the tourism potential of the North-East to tour operators at both the national and international levels is crucial because it is they who establish tourist routes and make these available through packages and such to visitors.
• **Overcoming the Problem of Connectivity and Basic Infrastructure**

The central budget allocations ought to play a significant role in creating institutional arrangements to provide efficacious ground services at both the government and private sector levels. Recognition of intra-state tourism will enable connectivity and communication links as well as attend to the concern that tourists and tour operators often ignore geographical demarcations in tourism plans and packages. The tourism policies of the North-Eastern states by and large, do not have a targeted tourist niche or market and are quite unfocused in that everything from adventure tourism, to wildlife, tea-garden and World War II nostalgia tourism are jostling to be considered. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture recently recorded that the Northeast was not ‘geared up for tourism’ Various plans for the up-gradation of tourist routes, destinations and accommodation were initiated but have yet to see the light of day. The most viable investment model for the Northeast is the Public Private Partnership (PPP or P3) model and efforts in this direction have been well-documented. However, the advancements do not seem coherent and political imperatives often mean that these projects extend indefinitely beyond their deadline or come to a halt altogether with the vague promise of being revived at some point in the future. Another major deficit is of air connectivity. Proposals for Greenfield airports in the North-East have barely taken root (with the singular exception of the airport at Pakyong, Sikkim).

• **Addressing the Security/ Defence Restrictions**

Tour operators in the Northeast are keen on a review of the Restricted Area Permit (RAP), Protected Area Permit (PAP) and the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to promote tourism, many of which escape revision because due to bureaucratic Red-Tapism and an unwillingness to periodically appraise the restrictions. The ILP is required for Indian citizens who wish to visit Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram; the PAP and the RAP are applicable to foreign nationals who have to be granted special permission to travel on recognized routes by the relevant authorities. Nevertheless, in this case, it would be wise to first consider whether the easing or removal of these restrictions and permits would adversely affect the security of an individual and of the region, even though they can quite understandably be a hindrance.

**THE ROADMAP**

**Competence Building**

As for the infrastructure, the demand would vary from segment to segment and necessary steps have to be taken to enhance the infrastructure capacity in the region. In terms of accommodation we are equipped with very few hotel rooms of 2 stars and above categories, and we do not have enough single 5 stars accommodation. As per the membership directory of Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Associations of India (FHRAI) we have very limited standard hotel rooms. However, many small enterprising accommodation ventures are unregistered and can accommodate more visitors than the combined strength of these hotels. To overcome the problems of accommodation the state Governments can adopt the policy of certification, monitoring and registering of lodges, inns and paying guest accommodations. With the increase in tourist inflow we need trained and qualified manpower in hospitality, tour operation, ground operation, tour guide and adventure sports sectors.
Mindset Management

It is acknowledged that as soon as the tourist lands in the region/destination the M.O.T. (Moments of Truth) begin to appear and the tourist will soon be overwhelmed with her perception of the experiences. This phenomenon bears crucial importance in producing a satisfied tourist. Obviously, a bad experience or impolite answer from a local will stimulate a negative perception for the tourist. This great challenge can only be overcome if the local community is totally (physically and emotionally) involved in the process of delivery of touristic experiences. Mindset of the host people is of vital importance. The population of the region is by nature very hospitable, honest and simple. Most of the communities have similarities with the people of East Asian countries like Thailand, Japan and South Korea. Thailand has already gained popularity for it slogan "Land of Smile". Can we too project our land as the "Land of Golden Hearts"! Whatever might be the slogan a concerted effort is to be launched to create awareness among the mass in selected destinations among general population in the region. Obviously the benefits of receiving an expectant tourist and a sending him back happy will be the major theme for this.

Tourism Product Development Modes

• Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT): Have all plans and policies directed towards generating jobs, dispersing economic benefits to rural areas, creating business opportunities for small and medium entrepreneurs, protecting socio-cultural and natural environment.

• Private-Public Partnership (PPP or P3): While developing and promoting tourism in the region private participation may be sought. To create a spirit of regional cooperation among all the States and Private Sectors for regional tourism development and thereby create synergy for the benefits of all stakeholders.

• To develop new tourist destinations, resorts, parks, convention and conference facilities and transport facilities including air services in and outside the North East, and maintain the existing and new facilities in good condition.

• To increase tourist traffic to the North East through various promotion measures like Exhibition, Festivals, Fairs, Cultural Programme, Advertising etc.

• Product development will also include identification of travel circuits, identify destination and micro level product identification and packaging in those circuits, prioritize the circuits in terms of segments of the tourists targeted etc. The most promising circuits are on the themes of Nature and Wildlife, Eco-tourism, Adventure tourism, Heritage Tourism, Craft Tourism, Orchid tourism, Tea Tourism, Summer tourism, Pilgrimage tourism, Himalayan tourism and River tourism.

Image building and Positioning

The Govt. of India slogan aptly says NE is a "Paradise Unexplored". We must work on this image and build it up brick by brick. The image building must have a concerted effort from all NE states as it has been repeatedly emphasized that NE should try to promote as ONE destination. Only then the phrase “Paradise Unexplored” will bear the desired meaning.

Thus furthering the development of Tourism Infrastructure in the North-Eastern region following important points needs to be taken care of:
(a) To overcome the problems of accommodation the state Governments should adopt more
distinct policy of certification, monitoring and registering of lodges, inns and paying guest
accommodations with standard facilities considering the increase inflow of tourists.
(b) With the increase in tourist inflow we also need trained and qualified manpower in
hospitality Sector- tour operations, ground operations, tour guides and in adventure sports.
(c) Distance, cost of travel, hygienic and hassle free rail and road journey are important
considerations to attract tourists. Most people travel for leisure and hassle free enjoyment
than anything else. This is an important area that Assam in particular and the North Eastern
Region in general should take serious note of. The internal rail and road networks and the
sub-standard condition of the existing roads must have to be improved. To entertain ethnic
tourism, connectivity with the ethnic tribe’s prone areas needs serious attention. This as a
corollary will invite a boost to their economic conditions as well. Moreover, national
highways within the town areas should be of one way roads to avoid hassles in traffic.
(d) Reopening possibilities of the historic Stillwell Road that stretches from Lekhapani (near
to Ledo) in Assam to Kunming in Yunnan province of South China via Myanmar would be a
viable link for connecting India to the South-East Asian nations. Since this region has high
potentiality to attract foreign tourist from the South-East Asian country including China and
Myanmar; as also people from other parts of India, given adequate infrastructure, would find
it both convenient and cheaper to travel around those countries; reopening of the Stillwell
road will give a real boost to the tourism effort.
(e) Lack of high standard hotels and resorts in the region is an important deficiency. It is
therefore pertinent to invite private investors in the area. New resorts and shopping centres
considering upon demand should be open up at strategic locations.
(f) Today’s tourism marketing is characterized more by Information Technology driven micro
marketing than macro deceptions. Tourists want specific information on their specific areas
of interest. Therefore, tourism managers should be trained and well-equipped to face this
emerging trend.
(g) Tourism as an important subject under curricula at the University and College levels is
yet to be introduced in Assam as also in other North-Eastern states. Introduction of the
subject would not only create local skills to serve and supplement the tourism effort; but
would also contribute significantly towards continuous qualitative improvement of the
industry through persistent research and consultancy services including seminars,
workshops, symposia etc. Moreover such initiative would be taken by the Degree Colleges of
the region.
(h) It is observed, some tribal people are gradually abandoning their traditional cultural
practices in domestic useable, dress habits and even in house building in the name of
modernization. The trend, if not cheeked, may appear as a mighty blow to our tourism effort.
It is therefore essential to cajole and motivate them to restrain from such practices.
(i) As a safeguard against gradual exhaustion if tradition and cultural of various ethnic groups
due to modernization and assimilation, it is essential to setup cultural museums at higher
educational centers like Universities and local Colleges with financial accommodation from
the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Govt. of India. Such museums may be tied up either with
that of tourism of such institutions. Else, the institutions may set up tribal research study
centers and maintain such museums in addition to other research oriented activities. Such
museums, if maintained in right earnest with gusto, will be unique places of attraction for many tourists.

(j) Tourism is primarily a private sector driven industry. Most tourism successful countries have built strong partnership with the private sector. Therefore, the states of the North East region must come up with bold positive polices to enable private initiatives to grow.

(k) Last, but not the least, tourism and peace has symbolic relationship. The prevailing turbulent situation in the entire North East India is not conducive for the investors and tourists to penetrate. However, we shall have to face the challenge keeping in mind that most factors contributing to such a situation are the fallout of unemployment problem faced by the youths of the region. The immense employment potential of tourism industry will serve as a positive check against such malice. A sincere and planned effort by the Govt. can solve many much problems.

EPILOGUE

The government regards tourism as of immense consequence can hardly be overstated; indeed, this dedication is fervently declared at every meeting, convention and seminar that is held for discourses on the subject. The tourism policies of the North-Eastern states are extremely well-meaning in their aims and in their grand-standing. However, despite the collective keenness in tourism development, the translation of assurances from paper to reality has yet to be realized and actual results are just as obscure as they were yesterday. The primary hurdles of publicity, tools of infrastructure facilitation and administrative and security review and reform ought to be first taken into consideration in conjunction with community participation for the successful execution of a dynamic tourism policy. Indian tourism has vast potential for generating employment and earning large sums of foreign exchange besides giving a flip to the country’s overall economic and social development. Much has been achieved by way of increasing air seat capacity, increasing trains and railway connectivity to important tourist destinations, four-laning of roads connecting important tourist centers and increasing availability of accommodation by adding heritage hotels to the hotel industry and encouraging paying guest accommodation. But much more remains to be done. Since tourism is a multi-dimensional activity, and basically a service industry, it would be necessary that all wings of the Central and State governments, private sector and voluntary organizations become active partners in the endeavour to attain sustainable growth in tourism if India is to become a world player in the tourist industry. So, let us all strive together to realize our dreams, let us wait for the visitors with infinite resources to satisfy them, let us welcome them with a “golden heart”!

REFERENCES


