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## A study on the potential of rural tourism in Assam: prospects and challenges

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### **Abstract**

Assam, as a tourist destination, has always been known for its natural flora and fauna. It is primarily known for its deep forests, endangered animals, mighty rivers and other natural elements. However, the state has many other tourism elements that are yet to be explored. These unexplored elements of tourism may help to provide a regular source of income to its host community and eventually will help to boost the economy of the state itself.

Rural Tourism itself is not a new concept in the world tourism, however, for Assam, it's an unexplored aspect and if planned in a strategic way, this may take Assam to the new heights on the domestic as well as the International tourism map.

Rural tourism is a type of Community-based tourism, where the tourist gets the first-hand experience by getting involved with the local community to experience their livelihood, cultural practices, food habits, etc. and receives the authentic cultural experience. Since rural tourism deals with the host community directly, this can turn out to be an effective contemporary tool to boost the tourism potentiality of the state to generate revenues not only for the state but for the entire host community. This study hence will try to focus on the potentiality of rural tourism in the state and will discuss various approaches that could uplift the same. It will also discuss the challenges that rural tourism is currently facing and list out a few solutions to eliminate those challenges.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, community based tourism, contemporary tool, host community, traditional social structure

### **1. Introduction**

Assam's tourism sector has always been a very feeble performer when it comes to domestic as well as international tourism performances. The reasons behind its weak performance are many to count. Unstable post-independence governments, civil wars, insurgencies and other political and non-political crises are to be named a few. However, in the past two decades, the state has seen some rise in terms of tourist flow to its various tourist places. These tourists' places that most the tourists visit are limited to the national parks and the urban areas of the state. Assam recently had two tourism policies that promises to revive the tourism sector of the state, one in 2008 and the other one in 2017. Though both the tourism policies promised a lot, in reality, those promises are far from being implemented properly. Nevertheless, the tourism board and the host communities may focus on a never explored tourism sector by the state which, if implemented properly can revive the tourism sector as well as the economy of the state, is the 'Rural Tourism'.

Rural tourism, as the name suggests, focuses on the rural part of a place where the authentic and indigenous practices of the people are still being practised. Rural tourism is a type of community-based tourism, where the tourists like to get a first-hand experience of another culture and other rural practices. The tourist can get involved with the local community and see how they function in day-to-day life. The uniqueness of the indigenous tribe or group of people can work as a pull factor for adventurous tourists. The activity that may involve in rural tourism can be discovering new foods, rituals, fashion, livelihood, dance, music, performing arts and various other cultural and non-cultural elements of the indigenous tribe, farming, village walks, camping, etc.

Assam is a land of various cultures and different tribal and non-tribal ethnic practices, and these cultural and ethnic practices may help the host community to develop economically when they share their experiences with the tourists.

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As community-based tourism, rural tourism has the potential to fill the gap between the tourist and the host community of the place by sharing their ideas, food habits, and different other cultural and non-cultural activities. This allows the members of the host community to generate a regular income from the tourists by showcasing their culture and indigenous practices as well as by letting the tourist get involved with their regular day-to-day activities. Tourism like this in a place like Assam has tremendous possibilities to convert the state into a popular rural tourism destination as well as to generate income both state-wise and host community-wise.

## 2. Literature Review

As stated by Ratz and Paczko (1998), "rural tourism is that kind of tourism which takes place in the countryside."

Gannon (1994) defines it as "a range of activities, services and amenities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their areas in order to generate extra income for their business."

Lane (1994) mentions clarifying that "the concept of rural tourism is tourism located in the rural areas i.e., the areas which are rural in scale, character and function reflecting the unique patterns of the rural environment, economy, history and location. In that sense, rural tourism is a tool which can increase the capacity of rural communities to control their rural milieu more gainfully."

Mishra and Saudal (2008) stated that, "the rural tourism is actually an activity that takes place in the countryside. It's multifarious and should entail farm/agricultural business enterprise, cultural, nature adventure and eco-tourism. As against typical tourism enterprise, a rural tourism enterprise has typical characteristics; it's experience-oriented; the location area is usually less inhibited, it's preponderantly in natural environments and it supports the preservation of culture, heritage, and traditions especially locally."

Sharpley and Vass (2006) also have stated that, "rural tourism exists in some form or the other. In various tourist destinations, the main centres of attraction are located in rural areas; some of them are mountains, lakes, national parks, cultural sites and others. Apart from these tourist spots, this sort of tourism can also be extended to experiencing actual rural lifestyles and locals of the area may readily welcome tourists into their life. Rural tourism has emerged as an important means of addressing the complex socio-economic challenges of the rural communities following the decline of the traditional agricultural economy."

According to Ramakumar & Shinde (2008), "Rural Tourism is developing as one of the best options available with its proven results in the west, to promote incredible India both for local and foreign tourists. Rural India has much to offer to the world. Rich in traditions of arts, crafts, and culture, rural India can emerge as an important tourist spot. The current estimated market for rural tourism in India is around Rs. 4, 300 crores per annum. It has the potential of appealing to both foreign and local tourists."

## 3. Objectives of the study

1. To study the prospects and challenges of Rural Tourism in Assam
2. To identify the rural tourism products of the state
3. To suggest measures to fix the issues related to rural tourism in Assam

## 4. Research Methodology

This research is done using explorative and descriptive methodologies and the same would be qualitative in nature. Since this study discusses the potentiality and the challenges of rural tourism in the state, the data collected are secondary.

## 5. Rural Tourism in Assam

### A. An Overview and its Importance

Assam's tourism approaches have always been nature-centric. Though the state had its struggles to emerge as a tourism destination after the independence, the tourism board of the state initially and mostly to date focussed on the natural segment of tourism to quickly draw tourists towards it as a sign of the desperate move. The natural elements of tourism in the state are undoubtedly one of the greatest in the country and also have been able to successfully draw a significant number of tourists every year. However, as the tourism market has changed over the years, depending on only one segment of the tourism would not be beneficial for state tourism, both revenue and wise. It is not that the state tourism has not given a chance to the other tourism segments at all, however, the prime focus has always been on the natural flora and fauna of the state.

Assam is economically one of the poorest states in India and despite being so naturally and culturally rich, it is not able to use these elements of tourism to uplift itself from the financial agony. Tourism, in general, is one of the largest industries in the world generating billions of dollars every year. There are many examples of Indian states and even countries which are dependent solely on tourism and have been able to generate enough amount of revenue to sustain and evolve as a whole. The potentiality of becoming a state like this is high when we talk about Assam as a state, which is culturally and naturally very rich.

Though there are various segments and aspects of tourism that are available to explore in the market, Rural Tourism is one of the segments which has the highest potential to grow and develop the state as well as its people.

Hence, it becomes important to understand the nature of Rural Tourism and how it works. Rural Tourism, in simple language, is a type of community-based tourism, where the tourist gets involved with the host community and experiences the culture and tradition directly by participating in the process. As community-based tourism, rural tourism may both, directly and indirectly, affect the economical, socio-cultural, and environmental factors in a particular geographical location.

Rural Tourism, if planned and executed well, may create employment for the host community and eventually generate income for them. This will help the rural people to develop a better standard of living and quality education for their children. Rural tourism may work as an additional income for the host community as many of the members of the community are associated with agriculture and other allied businesses. The youth of the society can use 'Rural Tourism' as a piece of equipment to boost the economy as it will help to generate employment among them.

With the continuous inflow of tourists, the rural area or the villages will see a rise in the income level of individual families, education and health infrastructure, etc. As the income of the local population grows, so will the prices of land, housing, and demand for other goods and services. These economic growths will ultimately help the

government to see an upward growth in revenue generation for the state.

Apart from the economic changes to the host community and the place, the environmental and other socio-cultural factors are to get affected as well. For example, more attention from tourists towards a particular natural place will certainly draw attention to preserving the natural habitats, bio-diversity and other historical monuments. Similarly, with the help of a growing inflow of tourists, the rural people will get to learn about the modern culture, creating a demand for better education, health system and other necessary changes.

## B. Rural Tourism Products

Rural Tourism, as discussed has a vast potential and has many bi-products to explore, especially when it comes to Assam. Here, we shall be discussing a few of the major tourism products that can be developed to attract the tourist both in the long and short run of time.

### 1. Village-Based Tourism

The village-based tourism can turn out to be the face of rural tourism glorifying the real rural areas of the state. Here the host community gets the chance to gain some direct financial benefits from the tourists as they come and directly invest their time and money with the villagers. The members of the host community get a chance to showcase their daily life in front of the tourists. The traditional dress, food habits, and cultural practices of the host community may all be a part of the same.

### 2. Cultural Tourism

Assam is a land of various cultural practices. It is the home of hundreds of indigenous tribes that have their rituals and other cultural practices. The culture of these host communities can be used as a potential tourism product. The local Bihu dance and Tea Tribe dances are some examples of these practices. The yearly festivals of the state can also work as a pull factor for the tourism of the state.

Another cultural product that is available in the state is the presence of the Neo-Vaishnavite faith. Neo-Vaishnavism is a result of the 15<sup>th</sup> century's religious movement by the great saint and scholar of the state, *Srimanta Sankardev*. Sankardev took various measures for the spread and expansion of this Neo-Vaishnavite movement or religion. One of the results of this movement was the establishment of a social organization known as 'Xatra'.

The word 'Xatra' originates from the Sanskrit word 'Sattrā'. Sanskrit Sattrā became Xatra in Assamese. Hemkosh (1900), is the first etymological dictionary in the Assamese language and compiled by Hemchandra Barua defines Xatra as 'the residential area of the noble, religious people – a religious institution in Assam'.

The xatra institution of Assam consists of a Kirtanghar (Namghar), a Manikut (Shrine), a Batsora or Karapat and Hati (two or four rows). In the initial stages only, religious discussions were performed in xatra. But later on, xatra takes part a vital role in the formation and development of greater Assamese society.

The state has around 809 registered Xatras and can play a vital role in pulling the domestic as well as international tourists, regardless of their own faith or religion.

## 3. Agricultural Tourism

Assam, being an agriculture-centric state has a tremendous possibility to showcase its agricultural practices and other related festivals to the tourists. Tea tourism would be one major player when we talk about Agri-based tourism. The tourist can be directly involved with the tea cultivation process by getting the first-hand experience by themselves. The tourist may also engage themselves with the tea tribe festivals and other rituals. Living in century-old bungalows, golfing, and tracking around the tea estate are just another few tourist activities that can be developed on a full scale.

## C. Challenges to Rural Tourism in Assam

Rural Tourism in Assam is still on a concept level and a lot of future planning and execution is required at both grassroots as well as in management levels. However, though a lot has to be done in the field of rural tourism in Assam, a few challenges need to be addressed on a priority basis. Below are a few of the challenges –

### a. Lack of Communication and Road Infrastructure

Lack of transportation and other communication service is a serious issue in the state. Most of the rural areas of the state are still not well-connected with the urban areas for smooth connectivity. This creates a gap between the tourism potential of the rural areas and the tourist who wishes to visit such places.

### b. Lack of Decent Accommodation Facilities

Though in rural areas we do not expect star hotels to operate, however, a sufficient number of decent hotels or lodges are very much required for the tourists to stay. It is noticeable that the urban or the semi-urban areas of the state fulfil the requirement of these hotels somehow, but when it comes to the rural areas, the number of hotels or lodges is really low.

### c. Lack of awareness among the host communities

As rural tourism is a new concept in the state, the members of the host communities are not aware of the potential that it holds. They are quite ignorant of this concept apart from a few tea estates and a few model villages, such as New Donga village in the Nagaon district near Kaziranga National Park.

### d. Lack of sufficient tour guides

This is a big challenge when it comes to tourism in Assam, and not only in particular to rural tourism. The insufficient amount of tour guides from both the government as well as the private sector is a big concern to the developing tourism sector of the state. Tourists are often found in a state of confusion without the proper guidance from tourism stakeholders.

## 6. Recommendations

As a contemporary tourism sector, rural tourism in Assam has too many loopholes and has a tremendous possibility to improve. With proper planning and execution, the concept of rural tourism in Assam shall not take too much time to levitate. Based on the above discussion on rural tourism products and challenges, here are a few of the recommendations that can help the state to develop itself as a rural tourism destination in the near future –

i) The first thing that Assam lacks in rural tourism

development is a structured state tourism policy to develop Rural Tourism in the state. Though the government of Assam recently launched a scheme named 'Amar Alohi', meaning 'our guest' which focuses on tourist home stays by the local people. This scheme encourages the host community to convert their homes into homestays by letting one or two rooms of their house to the tourists. Though this scheme sounds good on paper, no further action has been taken to promote or regulate the scheme to the general population. Hence, a structured tourism policy focusing on rural tourism is the need of the hour.

- ii) Along with a dedicated tourism policy, the government should allocate its attention to connectivity development. Identification of prospective rural areas and proper road connectivity to those places are very much required at the moment.
- iii) Developing tourist lodges and hotels in rural areas for the tourist to stay in is another factor of recommendation. With the help of schemes like 'Amar Alohi', the host community will get benefitted, however, the same has to be streamlined to be more effective. Private sector participation is also required for the state to emerge as a potential rural tourism destination.
- iv) Awareness programs on rural tourism for both the host community as well as the various travel and tour operators are required. The more they will know about the financial benefits, the more they will be encouraged to get involved with the process. Roadshows, conferences, and public meetings can be organised in the district and block-wise to draw attention at a grassroots level.
- v) Encouraging tour operators, travel agencies and other related stakeholders to develop the idea of keeping and training tour guides is the need of the hour. Assam has a very low amount of qualified tour guides who can direct and advise the tourists whenever they require. Proper training and recruiting should be done from both the public and private sectors to encourage more on having quality tour guides.

## 7. Conclusion

Assam, is a land of opportunities, especially when it comes to tourism. The rural tourism potentiality in the state is high as 98.4% of all the geographical areas of the state are rural. With this huge amount of rural areas, the potentiality of developing rural tourism in the state grows much higher than anything else. However, this needs a continuous approach and well-designed planning. Participation of both the public and private sector are required. The host community has to be well aware of the opportunities that they will get from rural tourism. Rural tourism can turn out to be a boon for society as it will certainly help to develop the financial status of the host community. Rural tourism also gives a window to the host community to showcase their cultural values to the outer world. The development of socio-cultural values, the economy of the society and the government are all interlinked with rural tourism. The only criterion which is required at the moment is to identify the true potentiality of rural tourism and act accordingly by both public and private sector tourism stakeholders.

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