



‘AWESOME ASSAM’- EXPLORING LESSER-KNOWN POTENTIAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN ASSAM. A STUDY.

“Our Assam is Beautiful; Her Virtues are Infinite”. – Bharat Ratna Dr. Bhupen Hazarika.

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ABSTRACT

Assam, which is termed as the land of “Blue Hills and Red River”, the land of the mighty river Brahmaputra and the land of blessing Maa Kamakya, the world famous One horned Rhino of Kaziranga and much more, has immense potential of Tourist destination. It is true that, a lot has to be explored through long term planning and framing policies in the part of policy makers in this direction. Tourism Industry has the great potential for generating income and employment opportunities. This paper makes an attempt to find out different lesser-known potential tourist destinations in Assam as well as challenges and problems faced by the tourism industry and future of tourism sector in Assam.

Keywords: *Tourism industry, Tourism policy, Economy development, Sustainable livelihood, lesser-known tourist destinations.*

INTRODUCTION

It is a natural desire of people to learn unknown, to see wild animals, explore nature, visit spiritual places, to see the history of lost signs that testify to the time and also explore the verities of food found in different regions. In addition to this, the desire to know much more about tradition and culture of the people of different regions, including various tribes etc. are also the objective of people who travel from one place to other. It is very important to notice that in the modern world, people's perceptions of life and time have changed a lot. Apart from a scheduled hectic life, one always wants peace, refreshment and to be one with nature. Assam, one of the eight states of north east region of India widely known for its rich widespread bio geography areas, scenic beauty, cultural variety, rich cultural heritage, ethnic

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values and ethnic food culture, wild life and landscapes, different archaeological sites, Green Tea Gardens and much more. It is true that Assam is already lagging behind decades in terms of tourism compared to other states of India due to different reasons. One of the reasons behind was insurgence. After the end of the pandemic, the situation is gradually changing in India as well as in Assam. Assam has tremendous strength of tourist attraction and destination which is comparative advantages over many other states of India. In this study, emphasise is given to the lesser- known potential tourist destinations in Assam, where there is greater scope of growth of different types of tourism.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- 1) To explore the prospects and potentialities of lesser-known tourist destinations in Assam.
- 2) To investigate the challenges and problems faced by the tourism industry in Assam.
- 3) To suggest measures for improving the tourism industry's future prospects.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an analytical approach based on secondary data. Sources include research journals, reports from national and regional newspapers, government publications, and other online resources. The study synthesizes these findings with the existing literature to present a well-rounded view of the tourism landscape of the lesser-known tourist destinations in Assam.

Prospects of Tourism: Assam is a beautiful paradise and even today its beauty is yet to explore. Unlike other part of India, Assam tourism is gradually becoming a preferable destination of domestic and foreign tourist. Its plentiful natural greenery scenic beauty, landscape, mountains, mighty river Brahmaputra and its tributaries, varied flora and fauna, rich wild life, colourful fairs and festivals, varied rich cultural resources, age old historical monuments, lush green tea gardens have always been a hub of fascination for tourist. Identifying the much less popular places and exploration of new tourist destinations of natural beauty will open new horizons in the tourism sector in Assam. This will definitely contribute towards both direct and indirect taxes, which will strengthen the fiscal reserves of the state and all the people involved in the tourist and manufacturing sectors of the state. Whenever we reveal the Assam Tourism in the international and national arena, only some of the known popular tourist destinations figures in our mind. They are – Kaziranga National



Park – habitat of one horned Rhinoceros, Manas National Park, Dibru Saikhowa National Park, Dihing Patkai National Park, Bhalukpong (Sonitpur), Maa Kamakya Temple, Umananda Temple in Umananda Island (known as Peacock Island), Majuli – the largest river island in India, Bhairabkund (Udalguri), Chandubi Lake, Jatinga, historical buildings in Sivsagar like – Rang Ghar, Kareng Ghar, Talatal Ghar, Joysagar Tank, Haflong (Haflong lake, hill station) etc. But there are much more alluring destinations which have potentiality of tourism and greater scope to be tourist place in the coming days. Some of the potential lesser-known tourist destinations can be listed as follows:

1) Natural and Eco-tourist destinations

i) Sasoni Merbil: The Sasoni Merbil, known as ‘Island of silence’, is a rich biodiversity hotspot in Assam. The region is located at a distance of about 70 km from Dibrugarh and about 50 km away from Mohanbari Airport (Dibrugarh). It is under Naharkatia Revenue Circle of Dibrugarh District. Merbil is an island and a remarkable biodiversity hotspot. It has total area coverage of about 1550 bighas of land. It is a place of natural beauty both in terms of nature and wild life. The region is home to more than 250 species of plants and more than 200 species of birds, both local and migratory. It is the inhabitant of many species of animals such as monkey, leopard, fox, mongoose, rabbits, deer, platypus, squirrels, etc. and also many different species of reptiles such as snakes and turtles, lizards and insects and butterflies. This precious natural wealth has ample scope of turning this place into one of the most cherished tourist destinations in the state. Every year in winter, the wetland attracts a large number of migratory birds, making it an ideal spot for bird watchers to visit the place. The Sasoni Merbil Eco-Tourism Project offers various activities like boating, Jeep Safari, jungle tracking, birds watching, ethnic and local traditional organic food for the tourists. There are facilities to stay at Sasoni Merbil Eco Tourism Project, cottages constructed by Assam Tourism. Home stay, Paying Guest are available along with OIL Guest House, Forest IB and Joypur Tea Garden Guest House may be suitable for the tourist to stay.

ii) Jeypore Rain Forest: The Jeypore Reserve Forest is located at Dibrugarh, situated in Naharkatia. Jeypore along with five other protected areas from the Upper Dihing West Complex, together they formed the largest contiguous tropical rain forest area with thick dense and lofty trees. The area is famous for its rich flora and fauna. The largest population of the endangered White-winged Duck, Brown Hornbill, Rufous-necked Hornbills are found



here. The other major fauna of the forest includes Elephant, Barking Deer, Bengal Tiger, Clouded Leopard, Wild Boars, Hoolock Gibbon, Capped Langur, Rhesus Macaque, reptiles species like – Rock Python, Banded Krait. Apart from this, large diversity of butterflies, more than 200 species of birds, and orchids enrich the forest beauty. Jeypore Rain Forest has every possibility to develop into an eco tourism destination. The activities for visitors include – bird watching, elephant riding, jungle trekking, rafting, camping inside the forest, nature photography etc.

iii) Maguri Beel: Maguri Beel or Maguri Motapung Beel, near the Motapung village of Assam's Tinsukia district (9 km from Tinsukia town) provides a unique glimpse into the lives of both residential and migratory birds, making it particularly popular during the migratory season when rare species can be sighted. Bird species such as the threatened marsh babbler, the swamp francolin and various species of ducks including rare and beautiful Mandarin Duck, which was first spotted in 2021 can be seen here. The Beel is situated next to the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park on the banks of the Dibru river and close to the confluence of the Dibru and Lohit rivers, which go on to join forces with the Brahmaputra. The wetland spread over an area of 9.6 sq. km was declared an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) in 1996. Its diverse flora and fauna and stunning landscape make it a place of interest for nature lovers. The wetland (Beel) is home of different species of mammals, birds, butterflies, fish and endangered Gangetic River Dolphin. Apart from bird watching, tourists also visit to enjoy traditional boat rides, photography, witness the diverse aquatic life etc. Maguri Beel can be transformed into a famous bird watching site due to its amazing beauty for attractive tourist destination. However, much degradation of the Beel happened due to the incident of Oil India Limited gas well blowout at Baghjan oil field on 9 June 2024. As the Beel located in the vicinity of the gas well, has also been impacted by the blowout. One dolphin was found dead after the gas leak. The blowout incident has not only an aquatic ecosystem impact but also contaminated the water and a coating of oil film on plant life was seen. In addition to this, due to siltation, the wetland is gradually filled with silt due to illegal mining at the confluence of the Dangari-Dibru River. Despite setbacks due to environmental degradation, the Beel holds promise as a key tourism site.

iv) The Molai Forest: The Molai Forest is a man-made forest on the Majuli Island in the Brahmaputra River near Kokilamukh in the Jorhat district of Assam. The man behind the creation of the Molai Forest was Padma Shree Jadav Payeng (an environmental activist and



known as ‘Forest Man of India’), where he spent 35 years of his life planting thousands of trees and formed the forest. The forest now encompasses an area of about 1360 acres / 550 hectares of forest cover. It is not only the world’s first man-made forest on a sandbar but possibly the largest forest within a river. There are several thousands of trees, including gold mahur, arjun, royal poinciana, silk trees, moj, koroi, simolu, cotton trees along with huge bamboo coverage. Along with a wide range of vegetations, Molai Forest is also home to huge wild life, such as – Bengal tigers, Indian rhinoceroses, Asian elephants, deer, monkey, rabbits, vultures, several bird species etc. It is an eco tourism destination, which can offer visitors the opportunity to experience the natural beauty, observe wild life and learn the conservation effort of Jadav Payeng. In Molai Forest, visitors can participate in natural walks, bird watching and enjoy the nature offering a unique experience for nature lovers.

v) Jokai Botanical Garden Reserved Forest: The Jokai Reserved Forest is about 12 km away from Dibrugarh town. The forest has an area of 11000 sq. km. and it has within it the Jokai Botanical Garden cum Germplasm Centre. The forest is a natural habitat for number of flora and fauna. Wide variety of monkeys, different species of deer, wild cats, hornbills, cranes, storks, woodpeckers and kingfishers are found here. This forest reserve cum botanical garden showcases the rich biodiversity of Assam. Covering a large area, it provides with lush greenery and flora including medicinal plants, exquisite orchids and rare species of trees and plants. The forest cum botanical garden offers a spot for nature walk, birds watching and photography and eco-friendly way to explore the nature. After planting of variety of flowery plants, the arrival of colourful butterflies enriches the beauty of the interior of the forest.

vi) Pohugarh: Pohugarh is located in Rudrasagar, Sivasagar, Assam. Pohugarh was Asia’s first natural zoo built during Ahom King Swargadeo Rudra Singha. The total area spread over about 360 bigha land. Originally, it was built for animals, which includes rhinoceros, deer, tiger, elephants during that time. Today it is a heaven for different migratory birds during winter. Species like the Siberian Crane, the Great Flamingo and various types of ducks and geese are common visitors of this place. So, it is now developing as bird watching favoured spot. There is a bright potentiality for Pohugarh to emerge as the first biodiversity monument in Asia. The rich biodiversity and scenic beauty will attract tourist a lot, and develop it as a much sought after tourist destination.



vii) Koya Kujia Beel: Koya Kujia Beel is located in Abhayapuri of Bongaigaon district of Assam. It is about 15 km away from Bongaigaon city. The Beel is the heaven for migratory birds during the winter session. The migratory birds such as Long-billed Vulture, White Wagtail, Moroccan Wagtail, Indian Wagtail, spoon-billed sandpiper, Bengal Florican, red-headed vultures etc. are birds that one can watch in winter. The Beel is a natural water body which is surrounded by the well-manicured gardens laden with rich vegetations of different species of plants, shrubs and herbs.

viii) Rukmini Island: Rukmini Island, also known as Rukmini Chapori, is a serene river island located on the Brahmaputra River near the town of Tinsukia in Assam, India. This picturesque island serves as a tranquil retreat away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Spread across a vast area, Rukmini Island offers a unique blend of natural beauty with its lush greenery, expansive sandbanks, and a calm river flowing by. It is a prime spot for bird watching as it attracts numerous migratory birds, making it a haven for ornithologists and nature enthusiasts. Besides its scenic beauty, the island provides an insight into the rural lifestyle of Assam with its small villages and traditional fishing practices. It is an ideal place for picnics, leisurely strolls, and experiencing the unruffled pace of island life. The island name is derived from folklore, with 'Rukmini' being a character from the Hindu epic Mahabharata. Visitors can reach the island via boats that operate from the mainland.

ix) Gethsemane Man-made Forest: It is a man-made community-led forest conservation initiative by the JFMC comprising six nearby villages under the Dhansiri Reserve Forest division, Bhairabkund, Udalguri. The plantation process started from the year 2006–2007. Now, it is a plantation centre consisting of more than 14 lakh plants of over 35 species; spread across 5500 bigha. The initiative of regeneration of forest began in 2005 to transform the barren forest land impacted by illegal deforestation during the 1980s. Many wild animals have returned to the forest. Animals such as elephant, leopard, wild boar, tiger, deer, etc. and reptiles such as paradise flying snake and python are found in the forest. The Lepidota Mansueta beetle species is also commonly found in the forest along with various species of butterflies and dragonflies. It is also home to various Himalayan, native and migratory birds. Different varieties of trees such as Hiju, Sal, Segun, Nahor, Jam etc. are found in this forest. There is provision of lodging facility, including experiencing staying in Tree House, Green House Restaurant, camping and also hiking facilities is there. There is also new picnic zone near Dhansiri River. It is a suitable place for eco tourism.



1) Religious Tourist Destination

i) Tilinga Mandir (The Bell Temple): Tilinga Mandir, a Shiva temple, in Bordubi town is about 7 kilometres from Tinsukia Town. The temple is mystically and spiritually stronger than other temples. We will get to see hundreds and thousands of bells of all sizes here tied to a huge Peepal tree. The temple is highly revered in the place because people here believe that wishes come true if one prays to Lord Shiva but after that you have to donate a bell, when one's wish is fulfilled. Devotees come and tie a bell and a red thread on the walls around the tree.

ii) Bhimashankar Jyotirlinga Dham: Bhimashankar Jyotirlinga Dham is situated in the Dakhini Hills also known as Daini Pahar near Pamohi in Guwahati, Assam. It is believed that Lord Shiva had incarnated here to destroy a demon called 'Bhimasura' son of Kumbhakaran, the younger brother of Ravana, the King of Lanka and protect his devotees. It is remarkable to notice that there is no concrete temple in the location. The Shiva Linga is situated in a place where the waterfalls gush in full force. The natural scenery approaching towards Jyoti Dham is very beautiful with lush green trees, hills and the sounds of various kinds of birds sweeten the whole atmosphere.

iii) Tipam Phake and Nam Phake Buddhist Temple: Tipam Phake Buddhist Monastery is situated in Tipam Phake which is about 64 km from Dibrugarh town. The river Buridihing (a tributary of Brahmaputra River) flows along this Tipam Phake village. The monastery is considered as epicentre of Buddhism belonging to Tai Phake community, a branch of ethnic Tai group with its own unique art, culture and tradition. Another Buddhist Monastery is in Nam Phake village, which is about 8 km from Tipam Phake village. The monastery in Nam Phake village is very beautiful. A statue of Lord Buddha is there on entering the main monastery. There is a water tank inside the monastery named Mucalinda Tank, which is considered to be very holy. An Ashok pillar situated near the monastery is another point of attraction. There is a beautiful library just beside which preserved the ancient texts, dresses and Buddhist symbols in a systematic manner. There is also a Tai Phake Museum in front of the monastery, where traditional items used by the community have been preserved. Tourists can visit any session, but visiting during festivals such as Poi-Nen-Chi festival in the month of March to pay homage to Lord Buddha. Another festival named Poi-Nun-Hok is a grand festival on occasion of birth of Lord Buddha, in both



the monasteries will be best experience to explore the rich tradition, culture and heritage of the Tai Phake community.

3) Exploring Natural Waterfall Destination

i) Garoghuli Waterfall: It is the nearest waterfall to Guwahati city, located only 9–10 km from Guwahati city. The area falls under the jurisdiction of Garbhanga Forest Reserved. The area has beautiful views and calming surroundings. It is to be noticed that Garoghuli Waterfall is not exactly a waterfall, but a stream which passes through rocks and falls upon a pool, thus creates a mini waterfall. Visitors can explore the diverse flora and fauna unique to this region by entering deep inside the forest area by cycling and off-road riding. One can go for hiking and trekking inside the forest also. It is also a picnic spot.

ii) Champawati Waterfall: Champawati Kunda or falls is located in the Nagaon district of Assam under Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary. The place is 1 hour from Nagaon town. Chapanala village is also near to the Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary. Apart from wide range of flora and fauna, migratory birds also find nestle during the winters. The favourable time to visit is post monsoon, when the rivers are filled and the waterfall can be sighted at its best.

iii) Kakochang Waterfalls: Kakochang Falls, locally also called as Keipholangso Falls, is situated 13 km from Bokakhat in Golaghat district of Assam. Tea plantations around the pool give perfect view from the falls. To visit the falls, visitors have to trek about 3.5 km from the Naharjan Goan. The way to the falls is wonderful as it is covered with bamboo trees, numerous small fresh water streams.

iv) Soloka Dare Waterfall: Soloka Dare Waterfall, also known as the ‘Baregaon Waterfall’, is one of the less known waterfalls, located about 12 km from Chandubi Lake in Kamrup District of Assam. The waterfall is small and narrow, but the countless tiny streams tumbling down the rocks create an amazing sight and a lovely pool below the fall. The surrounding forest of Soloka Dare Waterfall is a biodiversity hotspot. It is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna, some of them are unique to this region. The visitors can indulge in birdwatching, trekking, rock climbing, photography etc.

v) Ranikhamar Kafandonga Waterfall: Ranikhamar Kafandonga Waterfall is located in the last village of Assam, Ranikhamar, which is about 60 km away from Guwahati. It is situated



in the southern part of Kamrup district, sharing border with Meghalaya. The place is surrounded with full greenery and nature.

vi) Chapanalala Hodhodi Waterfall: Hodhodi Waterfall is located about 35 km from Nagaon town. It is surrounded by lush tea gardens and cradled by a small range of hills around. It is the destination of unparalleled beauty.

vii) Tegheria Waterfall: Tegheria Waterfall is also one of the less known waterfalls, about 50 km from Guwahati. The place offers wonderfully beautiful area covered with huge and lush green countryside, which is home to huge oak trees, dense shrubbery. To reach the waterfall, one needs to make a short hike over large boulders and other rocks.

The above beautiful lesser-known tourist destinations have significant potentiality to attract domestic and foreign tourists and proliferate the arena of Assam tourism in the coming days. This will definitely result in income and employment generation and contribute towards the economic development of the region. As tourism sector comes under State List, so it falls in the sphere of the state. Taking this into consideration, Assam Government has a greater role to play in this regard. But it is remarkable to notice that, despite a vast potentiality, the region has not been able to develop in the tourism sector in comparison to other regions of Indian states. Despite the presence of vast opportunities, no such perceptibility change has been seen in this sector. In a simple analysis, if we look a bird's eye view, then we find that, what a tourist would want first while visiting a place:

- i) A peaceful environment free from violence means security of life. Though insurgency has reduced significantly in Assam, security concerns still exist in some areas, deterring potential visitors.
 - ii) Favourable environment means comfortable climate.
 - iii) A sincere smile from everyone right from the driver to the hotel manager and the staff members.
 - iv) A better and faster wireless communication system.
 - v) Easy, comfortable and convenient smooth road and rail transport.
 - vi) Reliable tour operator, who can make complete arrangements from entry to exit.
- The lesser-known tourist destinations, near the famous known listed destinations should also be arranged along with to explore those hidden gems.



- vii) Qualified and skilled bilingual local guide.
- viii) Good hotels with all accommodation facilities according to one's financial level
- ix) Another important issue is providing facilities of clean and hygienic toilets in the tourist places.

Steps to be taken:

- i. Development of infrastructure: As many lesser-known tourist destinations are difficult to access due to poor infrastructure and connectivity. So, improving roadways, rail network, hotels, and guesthouses, along with improving connectivity to lesser-known destinations is important to make them more accessible.
- ii) Sustainable livelihood initiatives: Encouraging local communities to take part in the tourism economy, thereby ensuring that they are benefited from the development of tourism. For this, it is very important to provide skill development training for local communities to improve hospitality services and manage tourism sustainably.
- iii. Marketing and Promotion: Utilize digital platforms and social media in marketing, branding, raise awareness of tourist spots, and offer special promotional campaigns.
- iv) Tour operators across the country must be convinced on the basis of profitable policies that Assam is one of the safest and prosperous tourist destinations in the country.
- v) Implication of the motto 'Atithi Devo Bhava' is very important, As, a tourist comes for the sake of tourism or other business, as soon as he gets off the plane or train, the taxi drivers are surrounded and stick to them for taxi service and other favour. This should be stopped; as such act will definitely convey a negative impact.
- vi) Tourism is not run by government enterprise alone. This requires public and private initiative. So, the concept of PPP (Public Private Participation) model is very much applicable to boost this sector.
- vii) Environmental degradation: Over-exploitation of natural resources, such as illegal sand mining, illegal fishing, soil cutting, deforestations, water pollution, lack of cleanliness in the tourist spot etc. threatens the biodiversity and sustainability of tourism. For this, the concerned district administration should keep strict vigilance to prevent environmental degradation in tourist areas.



vii) More budgetary allocation is needed to the lesser-known tourist places to provide improvement in infrastructure and other facilities as it is provided to other known famous tourist places, so that the flow of tourism also increases.

CONCLUSION

Assam holds immense untapped potential in the tourism industry. With its rich biodiversity, unique cultural heritage, and stunning landscapes, the state can become a sought-after destination. However, the full realization of its potential requires substantial investment in infrastructure, the promotion of sustainable practices, and the active participation of the local community. The government's current initiatives provide a strong foundation, by giving tourism as industry status, but much more needs to be done to address the challenges and transform Assam into a thriving tourism hub. By incorporating modern technologies, community-driven tourism models, and greater global marketing strategies, the State has the greater opportunity to establish itself as a premier destination for nature and eco-tourism, adventure tourism, cultural and religious tourism and also explore more tourist places which are lesser known, but need a little attention and favour from the government in extending the ambit of Assam tourism landscape for better future and growth. It is hope that Assam will surpass the all-time place of development in this promising sector on the basis of new tourism policy in the state in the coming years. It will definitely be able to move forward on the golden path of the new era and say 'Awesome Assam'.



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