

DYNAMICS OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) IN TOURISM PROMOTION

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Abstract: *The importance of Information Technology (IT) in tourism has increased tremendously over the years. Role of IT within the context of tourism travel and hospitality is of profound importance in a nation's development. It has influenced all walks of our lives over the last few decades in an incredible manner with the Tourism and Travel sector being one of the principal beneficiaries. With the advent of IT into the travel sector, things have changed. Travel has become much more enjoyable and comfortable. Places of tourist interest and scenic beauty often do not catch the attention of the customer largely due to the fact that they are not marketed well. The advent of the Internet is also having deep impacts on the industry. Manipur has its own physical and social constraints. The state has a complex social composition with diverse ethnic communities including different scheduled tribes of different ethnic origins. There is apparent disparity in the level of income and consumption between the rich and poor, between public living in the hills and valleys. IT can play an important role in the socio-economic and political development of the state. It can create new employment opportunities. IT can promote tourism and bring positive opportunities for community development even in the remotest district of Manipur. This paper examines the present status of Information Technology, role of State in promoting IT, its policies and subsequently promotion of tourism in Manipur.*

Key Words: *Community, Information Technology, Industry, Tourism, Socio-economy*

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries. It is one important component of socio-economic development. Tourism can be simply defined as a travel and stay of a non-resident. In order to travel to a particular area there must be a reason. For instance a person may travel for leisure, business, visiting near and dear relatives, health, education etc. Tourist chooses a destination for one or the other reason. Transport is necessary for travel and accommodation to stay at the destination. Therefore tourism as an industry has three major components: Attraction, Accommodation and Transportation.

Attraction sector comprises natural and man-made beauties which are developed to satisfy visitors' recreational, educational and aesthetic needs. Accommodation sector includes all types of establishment that offer lodging to visitors in the Hotels, Motels, Guest houses etc. In the accommodation sector the contribution of Information Technology is prominent. An individual or group wishing to travel to any part of the world can have access to the accommodation service providers through internet. A visitor can access information about the kind of hotels at the destination, their ranges of product, the price and other relevant information without moving out from the office or home. Information can be obtained aided by still or moving pictures in order to give an exact feature of an accommodation, facilities and services of one choice. At a destination also visitors are at edge during their stay in every respect, in getting information about their business, family or other information back home.

Transport sector includes air, water and surface transport. In the attraction sector both manmade and natural attraction, owners need to communicate or inform their customers and potential customers about their production. The national tourist offices must discharge their duty of promoting their country's tourist attractions using information technology products. Information through promotional videos, Internet Websites, television advertisements and travel documentaries are the main information dissemination tools.

In the Advertising Sector, travel and tourism fit well with interactive media because they are an information intensive industry where transactions can be made online, and current Web users are heavy users of travel and tourism products and services. Fast and easy information flow is of paramount importance to build confidence in the travelling public. In recent years, the

confidence built due to the use of modern IT has been demonstrated by a tremendous increase in the number of travelers worldwide.

With the advent of IT into the travel sector, things have changed. Travel has become much more enjoyable and comfortable. The modern day traveler has a plethora of options to choose from, with Internet being the favourite haunt for the potential traveler. There are number of software which caters to the needs of the tourism and hospitality sectors. Travel agencies, tour operators, hotels etc use modern systems equipped with powerful applications that work on huge databases. Computerized front office has lent elegance to the modern offices which are largely paperless. Office automation has led to efficient and accurate information processing. A person armed with the right information is the most powerful in the modern era. Computerized systems are used to extract information out of the voluminous quantities of data store in databases. Querying a database, be it for reservation enquiry or booking a ticket is in the hands of the end user. The customer has a number of options to choose from when embarking on a journey or getting information about a tourist spot.

Geographical Setting of Manipur

Manipur is a landlocked state situated between 93.03E-94.78E longitude and 23.83N-25.68N latitude. It is located in the extreme corner of northeast India. With two distinct areas, the hills and plains, the state is somewhat rectangular in shape. The geographical area of the state is 22,327 sq km. It comprises 0.68percent of the total land surface of the whole country. The valley located in the middle of the state accounts for 1,862 sq km is only 10%, while the hill area constitutes 90% of the total land area of the state. The state has a long border area of 854 km, of which 425 km is international border touching upper Myanmar and the rest 502 km touches Nagaland, Assam and Mizoram. Nagaland bound the state in the North, in the south by Mizoram, and in the west the Cachar district of Assam. The river system in the state flows from north to south. There are two main rivers, eight small rivers and numerous streamlets. The two main rivers are the Imphal and the Barak, play an important role in the economy of the state. The Imphal river irrigates the valley districts, flows into Myanmar through Chin Hills and finally into the Chindwin river of Myanmar. The Barak serves as the only means of transportation for the

inaccessible Tamenglong district and Jiribam sub-division of Imphal East district. It passes through the western hill region of the state and then flows through the Cachar valley.

The altitude of the state above the mean sea level varies from 790m to 2020 meters. It has sub-tropical temperate climate. Manipur splits up naturally into two tracts viz. the hill and the plain. The hill district comprises of five districts namely (i) Senapati, (ii) Tamenglong (iii) Churachandpur, (iv) Chandel and (v) Ukhrul, while the valley consist of four districts namely (i) Imphal West, (ii) Imphal East, (iii) Bishnupur and (iv) Thoubal. The valley area has two constituent parts, one of which is the Imphal valley in the heart of the state and the other is Jiribam valley bordering the Cachar district of Assam. There are altogether 38 administrative subdivisions. The Manipur Hill comprises of six autonomous hill districts, which are Ukhrul, Chandel, Churachandpur, Tamenglong, Senapati and Kangpokpi.

Demography

The total population of Manipur according to 2001 Census is 2293896; of this 1161952 are males and 1131944 are females. The hill districts houses a population of 882130 while the valley districts comforts a population of 1411766. The density of population in the state is 103 persons per sq km as against all India of 324 persons per sq km. It is only 44 persons per sq km in the hill areas, while valley is densely populated as high as 631 persons per sq km. One finds Imphal West district with 856 persons per sq km, the highest density of population among the districts. Tamenglong district has the lowest density of population with only 25 persons per sq km.

Present Manipur is a pluralistic society. The people of Manipur were predominantly Mongoloid with some non- Mongoloid Aryan elements (Kabui Gangmumei, 1991:3) It is the home of (i) Meiteis (Hindu Vaishnavites and Sanamahi devotees) and Meitei Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) in the four valley districts (ii) Nagas and Kukis in the five hill districts and (iii) small communities such as Marwaris, Punjabis, Biharis, Bengalis, Sikhs, Tamils and Nepalese inhabited in all parts of the state. Meiteis constitutes about sixty (60) percent and Pangals (Manipuri Muslims) which constitutes about eight (8) percent of the population. Meitei follows Hinduism and traditional Sanamahi religion. Approximately 40 percent population of the state follows Hinduism. There are twenty-nine (29) different tribes (Das, R.K., 1985:5) under Kuki

Naga tribes which forms around thirty (30) percent of the total population. Most of the Kuki and Naga tribes follow Christianity. There are approximately 34.04 percent Christians in the state.

Infrastructure

An overview of the infrastructure is indeed necessitated for having a broader perspective of present development. Infrastructure is important for making/charting future course of development planning including IT, which is an important technological revolution of the century. The infrastructure can be classified into two categories: (i) Economic infrastructure constitute power, transport and communications. (ii) Social infrastructure constitutes education, health, general administration, labour, employment and poverty.

Power:

Power is an important component needed for economic development. In the state power generation was based on diesel generating sets in the early days. The State has neither coal nor oil reserves (Brajamani Singh; 2003:27). Prior to the First Five year plan, the small hydroelectric plant at Leimakhong served the state. The power generating system comprised of two hydel sets of 100kw and 56 kw and diesel set 62.5 Kw and 46.5Kw with a system demand of 130Kw in 1950-51(Techno- Economic Survey of Manipur, NCAER, 1961:59). In the mid 1950, major initiatives to harness the hydel project started with the construction of Loktak Hydro Power project got commissioned in 1984 but is not enough to cater the rising needs. Manipur gets a little share of 28.95 percent from the Loktak Hydro Electric Project.

Transportation and Communication:

Manipur is served by two means of transport viz-roads and airways. A railhead has been extended from Silchar of Assam to Jiribam of Manipur covers only 1.5 km. The state has air links with Kolkata, New Delhi, Silchar, Guwahati and Aizawl. Surface transport stands as the important means of transport and communication. There are three National Highways (NH) which are NH 39 (Indo-Mayanmar Road), NH 53(New Cachar Road) and NH 150 (Jessami-Tipaimukh Road). The national highways covering 967 km as on March 2005 constituted 11.18 percent of the total road length of the state and the State Highways (SH) covering 668 km accounts for 7.72 percent of the total road length of the state. The state has a total road length of

8,648 km, of which surfaced and un-surfaced roads were 4,573 km and 4,075 km respectively (Economic Survey Manipur , 2008-09:147-52). The NH 39 connects the state capital with the railway station at Dimapur, Nagaland and touches the international border town of Moreh in the south East. It is of immense importance to the people as goods and people are transported through this route.

The Manipur State Road Transport (MSRT) established in the year 1945 is not functioning today. Unable to sustain losses and yielding a negative return on investment, the surface transport in Manipur has entirely been taken by the private operators. Thus the MST only exists in name. As the government depend on private transporters, inter-state surface transport system is fairly bad. During frequent economic blockades in the NHs, the government had to rely on the private transporters with lots of bargaining.

Transport provides the essential link between tourism origin and destination areas and facilitates the movement of holidaymakers, business travelers, people visiting friends and relatives and those undertaking educational educational and health tourism. Before setting out on a journey of any link, ever traveler make sure which transport company has a good safety record. Manipur was more linked to South China and South East Asian countries. There is a close cultural affinity of the Manipuris starting from household life and the individuals' temperament to a community way of life. Cultural congruence and parallelism between and among the South East Asians are remarkable despite variations in language and other aspects. Many similar ethnic groups and cultures are still visible across the eastern international border.

Communication system is allied to transport system. Communication system comprises of postal service, telegraph, telephone service etc. The communication embedded infrastructure in the state is stagnant or is rather growing at a slow pace. The district wise growth of the communication facilities is fluctuating. None of the budget documents for all the past years including the present one carries any entry in the 'communication head'.

Social issues:

The impact of insurgency in the state has been felt intensely in every aspects of life. The existence of many insurgent groups operating in the valley and the hill areas has increasingly imperiled the society as a whole. The situation had drifted from bad to worse during the last four decades. The economic slowdown in Manipur has reduced opportunities for employment, funds for public services such as health, sanitation, pure drinking water supply and education. Most of its hill districts which are strongholds of insurgents are reeling under the poverty mainly because of under utilization of natural resources and for want of adequate infrastructure. In Chandel district, over 64 percent of the people live below the poverty line, while in Churachandpur, Ukhrul and Tamenglong districts, it is estimated to be in between 51 and 55 percent (Vedaja Senjenbam, 1998:118). Many frustrated youth without employment are under pressure from insurgents to join them and hence under suspicion of the security forces. In the process, frustrated lots become the victims of drug abuse.

Information Technology Facilities in Manipur

Policy initiatives:

The government of Manipur has framed an IT policy in the year 2003. The government as a part of its IT policy has been able to set up a STPI at Imphal. In the last five years, secretariat LAN with about 250 nodes provides connectivity to fifty department head office which is connected through radio frequency on WAN. District headquarters are equipped with video conference facilities. All districts courts and high courts are connected via VSAT. The state government with the assistance from NIC Manipur state unit has been implementing e-governance projects.

Infrastructural set up:

NIC Manipur State unit was established in the year 1988 with its office at state Secretariat in Imphal. In the year 1990, it opened its 8 district offices at a time. The ninth centre i.e Imphal East District was opened in the year 2000. NIC is widely known for its prompt services in the field of IT. It has been rendering its services as IT consultant, software developer, infrastructure provider and project implementer. A number of servers have been set up at NIC Imphal to cater to the needs of the state. Manipur state centre has web server, mail server, proxy

server, data server, anti-virus server and backup server. Operations and maintenance of NICNET, SWAN and SDC are at state unit and district centers. WiMax is operated only in district centers. Video conferencing is available at the offices of Chief Secretary and Director General of Police (www.manipurnic.in). NIC also developed software such as e-PRI, e-procurement for PMGSY, file tracking system for secretarial jobs, computerized personal system for all the employees, Treasury Net etc. The most successful service is the development of CPIS and computerization of pension payments of Manipur government employees. The program received Prime Minister's award (IT Annual Report 2009-10:113). This initiative of NIC has been appreciated in all circles. It is considered as a measure to reduce corruption in the state. Due to this development of MGEL list, the government employees are hassle free in collecting their salaries.

Software Technology Parks of India (STPI), Imphal:

STPI Imphal centre is located at Mantripukhri, Imphal. It provides services to the IT firms and enterprises. Presently it operates with six staff. The private firms/enterprises take up IT software/service business leveraged on STPI facilities. Users can get connection from STPI point by lease line, Wireless LAN, Radio link, optical fiber cable (OFC) etc. STPI caters services to the IT industry and not to the public at large. For small enterprises registered with STPI, incubation centre facility can be availed. The incubation centre in the STPI as of present has been provided to few enterprises as of now. Some of this are 'Cyber Café' where users will have to pay on per-hour basis only for downloading or uploading their files. 'Soft Point' is a data communication system of STPI. It is planning to provide point-to-point digital circuit from Imphal to any part of the globe. The service in terms of International Private Leased Circuit (IPLC) is to be made available to any country in channels of nx 64Kbps for the point to point customer requirements from 64Kbps to 2Mbps. Thus the facilities can be extended in the STPI complex or any location in Imphal through radio or land leased circuits. The STPI is to provide 'softLINK' to units inside STPI complex on LAN. The LAN will further be connected to the international gateway and managed from network operating centre of STPI, Imphal. The LAN setup will be directly connected to the international gateway through the UTP backbone. The units located outside the STPI complex may access soft LINK services either by radio local loops or by leased BSNL local loops.

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited:

BSNL head office or 'Telephone Bhavan' is located Babupara, Imphal West. It is under the control of General Manager (Telecom) North East II Circle. Its services are extended to all the nine districts of the state. A Sub-Divisional Engineer/ Sub Divisional Officer, Telecom heads every district. Area of operation is not distinctly demarcated. BSNL's North East-II circle covers Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. BSNL is reported to have been incurring heavy losses amounting to Rs 36 crore due to non-payment of bills by its subscribers. Subscribers in Manipur alone have outstanding dues of Rs 18.5 crore. The number of customers switching over to other service providers without clearing BSNL bills is on the increase in Manipur with the advent of various private service providers like the Aircel, Airtel, Tata Indicom and Reliance etc (<http://nagarealm.com/index.php>). Some of the reasons cited by the subscribers for switching over to other service providers are inadequate service and irregularities in the billing system.

The Department of IT:

DIT, Government of Manipur been bifurcated from the erstwhile Department of Science & Technology and IT in September 2009. The DIT Manipur is functioning under the administrative control of the Chief Minister, Chief Secretary and Secretary IT (www.ditmanipur.org). The department is responsible for implementing all e-Governance projects and all IT related projects/schemes in the state. It is handling the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) scheme of the Government of India.

Community Information Centre in Manipur:

In Manipur there are altogether 33 Community Information Centers (CICs) in 33 blocks (<http://cicmanipur.nic.in/html/about.htm>). NIC is the implementing agency of CIC and takes active role in implementing project by organizing its available resources of staff and equipment. Thus two CICs (1) CIC Keirao Bitra and (2) CIC Sawombung were commissioned in the year 2001 as pilot projects in Manipur. Later the remaining blocks were inaugurated in August 2000 as a part of the main project. NIC Manipur looks after the maintenance and operation of 33 numbers of CICs in Manipur for the smooth operation. CICs have been organizing trainings and workshops for the common people to enable them access to CIC. NIC monitors daily situation of all the CICs by way of getting e-mails or by chatting.

Conclusion:

The draft tourism policy 2011 of the state states-use of latest technologies like GPS, Satellite phones, etc. to be encouraged for adventure tour operators recognised by the Government for client safety. Direct sales through the internet are the most important tool of distribution. Worldwide usage and access to the internet is playing an increasingly important role in the travel planning and decision making processes of customers. Travel planning and booking are among the most popular online activities in major e-commerce markets. Research indicates that more travelers investigate their travel options online. The growth in online travel bookings has outpaced other online sales for many reasons, including access to extensive information to aid selection; perceived availability of choice; convenience of booking online (from home and out of business hours); and the perception of price advantage. The Government shall establish a vibrant website which essentially broadcasts the State tourism as information, marketing and purchasing tool including transaction and online booking system. Efforts to make use of technology for higher productivity and improve the methods and processes of working in the tourism sector through *e-governance, IT and IT Enabled Services* besides significantly encouraging e-commerce portals to extend effective promotion and marketing support to investors, hoteliers, tour operators, medical facilitators, etc. Manipur State IT policy 2003 has the objective to promote investments and encourage private sector initiative in IT related infrastructure and services, so as to increase the contribution of IT in the economic growth of the State. The IT policy 2003 is the latest and does not contain any specific programme or policy for the development of tourism through IT in the state. Overall, we can find that the government initiative in all the sector; be it in the infrastructure development, power, communication, Information Technology along with all social issues has not been able to improve tourism in the state.

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