

## PROSPECTS OF ECOTOURISM IN SIVASAGAR DISTRICT OF ASSAM

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### **Abstract:**

*Tourism is a multifaceted industry. It has been a major source of revenue for many a nations. Some of the nations have grown because of tourism. Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, etc are some of those. Tourism helps in flow of tourists and revenue into a region. The economic development of a region is largely influenced through tourism activities. Sivasagar district in Assam has been primarily identified to tourists as a place of historical importance. Indeed the district has tremendous significance to historians. However, with the richness in natural blessings inherited owing to its geography, the region can flourish as an ecotourism destination in Assam. The present study explores the prospects of the district in the ecotourism map of North East India. It identifies a few avenues where ecotourism, if promoted, can change the future of the region and the people*

**Keywords:** Eco - tourism, entrepreneurship, wetlands, development

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism plays an important role as a foreign exchange earner for a country. As per the Ministry of Tourism, GOI, during the year 2011, India registered a positive growth of 9.2 % over 2010, against the UNWTO's estimated growth rate of 5% for the world in 2011. During the same year foreign exchange earnings (FEE) from tourism were US\$ 16.56 billion against US\$ 14.19 billion in 2010, with a growth of 16.7%. There has been a continuous increase in domestic tourist visits, with the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of domestic tourist visits to all States/UTs from 1991 to 2011 being 14.34%. The number of tourists in Assam during 2011 has shown an increase of 7.12 % (domestic) and 8.20 % (foreign) against 2010. Assam ranks 20<sup>th</sup> in the list of domestic tourists, and 24<sup>th</sup> in foreign tourists amongst its counterparts.

As cited in Holtz & Edwards (2003) and according to Fillion, 40-60% of the International tourists are primarily nature based and 20-40% wildlife based. According to the World Tourism Organization and as stated in the website of Incredible India, eco-tourism is the fastest growing market in the tourism industry with an annual growth rate of 5% worldwide and representing 6% of the world GDP.

## 2. Ecotourism- Definition

The word Eco-tourism is derived from two words - 'Ecosystem' & 'Tourism'. The Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines ecosystem refers to the complex of living organisms, their physical environment, and all their interrelationships in a particular unit of space. An **ecosystem's** abiotic (non-biological) constituents include minerals, climate, soil, water, sunlight, and all other nonliving elements; its biotic constituents consist of all its living members.

Honey (2002) refers to ecotourism as a form of travel to fragile, pristine and unusually protected areas that would contribute to economic development, political empowerment and instil respect within cultures.

According to Ross and Wall (1999), ecotourism should be a means of combining the goals of resource conservation and local development through tourism in a synergistic fashion. Further it is essential that tourism development do not interfere with the goals of protection and preservation of natural areas and biodiversity.

The British Ecotourism Market UNWTO (2002) defines ecotourism as that form of tourism which have the following characteristics:

1. All nature-based forms of tourism with purpose of observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas.
2. Includes educational and interpretation features.
3. Generally but not as a rule, the service provider partners at the destinations tend to be small, locally owned businesses.
4. Minimises negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment.
5. Supports the maintenance of natural areas which are used as ecotourism attractions by:
  - generating economic benefits for host communities, organisations and authorities managing natural areas with conservation purposes,
  - providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities,
  - increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists.

As is evident from the above definitions ecotourism in practice is a blending of the cultural fervour with nature in tourism. The rich biodiversity is highlighted along with the rich traditions of a region. The purpose of enriching the local communities is fulfilled through the merger of both in this form of tourism.

### 3. Objective

The objective of the Study has been to explore the prospects of Sivasagar district of Assam as a destination for ecotourism

#### 4. Methodology of the study

- I. The present study is based on primary and secondary sources of data.
- II. It is a descriptive case study form of study conducted in the district of Sivasagar in Assam
- III. Primary sources of data include observations of the author during two year stay in the district
- IV. Secondary data have been obtained from books on the subject and relevant studies on the subject in other parts of the country and abroad in journals.

#### 5. Success stories of ecotourism

- I. Costa Rica has successfully made a name for itself in ecotourism. There was a time when deforestation had been widespread in the region. With tremendous pressure of environmentalists and scientists, the government of the country was forced to respond to environmental protection. The Topography of Costa Rica contributes to an exceptional biodiversity and such great variety of eco-regions. The government has taken steps to enhance the growth in the tourism industry by enhancing preservation efforts.

As cited in Narayan, S. (1998), since 1970, Costa Rica's GNP has grown from approximately \$1000 million to roughly \$9000 million in 1995. Tourism has been the greatest source of foreign exchange in the country. Since 1970, when ecotourism was just beginning to take off in Costa Rica, tourism revenues have comprised an increasingly significant portion of GNP. Specifically, tourism revenues as a percent of GNP grew from 2% in 1970 to around 8% in 1994.

- II. A study conducted by Karmakar, M during 2008 in selected locations of West Bengal, revealed that the revenue generated from ecotourism activities have contributed largely towards the revenue from the locations. The most popular ecotourism destination in West Bengal, Lataguri, near Gorumara National Park, has seen a remarkable increase in total revenue collected from tourists from none in 2000 to \$ 57460 in 2007-08. Prior to 2000 there was no revenue generation at Lataguri because of the absence of ecotourism activity there.

Similarly during the period of 2002-03 the income generation from ecotourism at Kunjnagar was US \$ 16920 and in 2007-08 it reached to US \$ 21720 . This income has been generated through the development of ecotourism in Kunjnagar.

Rasik Beel<sup>1</sup> which is the transit location for migratory birds like little Cormorant, large Egret, Open Bill Stork, lesser Adjutant Stork, lesser Pied King fisher, etc. now houses Nature Interpretation Centre, Fish Aquarium, Children Park, the Gharial Rescue centre, Animal Rescue centre and the Deer Park. This has changed the Rasik Beel wetland into an ecotourist centre. The beel and the ecotourism centre has also been earning a huge amount of revenue.

- III. According to Rai (2005) and stated in Thakur et.al. (2005)ed., tourism in Sikkim has contributed to employment and income generation in the state. The average annual income in the state showed a rise of 7 per cent over the base year 1997, of which 70 per cent was contributed to tourism, 18 per cent to service sector and the rest from farm activities.
- IV. Gogoi and Bora (2011) states that the preference of nature or wildlife tourism is 95 percent in Kaziranga National Park (KNP) for both domestic and foreign tourists. The duration of stay in Assam is nominal as compared to India. It is 12.5 Percent for domestic tourists and 7.7 percent for foreign tourists. Also was found that of the entrepreneurial activities carried out nearby KNP, tourist have been found satisfied in buying handloom and wooden products, though at prices higher than the market prices these products. Such handloom products are bought at weaver's looms. The traditional foods of Self Help Groups, Assamese cultural activities are excellent attractions for both domestic and foreign tourists in Kaziranga.
- V. As detailed in Thampi(2005), the ecotourism project at Periyar in Kerela worked with twin objectives of managing the protected areas also with the involvement of the local community. The success of the project could be assessed by the fact that those previously involved in illegal activities on the sandalwood trees have joined for formation of eco development committees and bamboo rafting programmes for the tourists. Ecotourism products at Periyar tiger reserve includes the bamboo rafting, tribal heritage exhibition

<sup>1</sup> A beel is a water body similar to a lake and with static water. Beels are formed with inundation of low lying areas where water gets trapped during floods. The term is popularly used in Assamese and Bengali languages.

centre, etc. the success of the project lies in the fact that the poachers have now been converted to protectors of the sanctuary. Earnings from the bamboo rafting programme goes to the community development fund from which a sum of approx. Rs. 3500/- goes to each member as earnings.

## 6. Locations for developing ecotourism in and around Sivasagar.

The state of Assam has been known to be a perfect conglomerate of culture, traditions, dialects, practices, beliefs, customs etc with richness is natural beauties. Sivasagar occupies a prime picture in the tourism map of Assam as a historically rich town. The district is between 94.25 and 95.25 Longitude East and 21.45 and 27.15 Latitude North. It has elevation of 86.6 Mtrs above the main sea level. The district receives an annual rainfall of 1478.1mm.

The credit of enhancing the importance of Sivasagar goes to the the Ahom dynasty which ruled in Assam for over 600 years. Rang ghar, Kareng ghar, Talatal ghar, Shiva doul, Devi Doul, Vishnu Doul, Charai deo Maidams, Tanks at Gaurisagar, Joysagar, Rudrasagra and Sivasagar are some of the monuments worth mentioning, though the list still continues. The monuments stand as a testimony to the rich cultural heritage of the Ahom dynasty. Sivasagar has been identified in the tourism industry of Assam from the perspective of historical tourism. Undoubtedly, Sivasagar, the once capital of Ahom kingdom has ample monuments to justify positioning of the district in the websites of Assam as a historically important place.

Yet, there is more to explore in Sivasagar; in and around Sivasagar, a plenty of locations could flourish through ecotourism

Panidihing wild life sanctuary in the district is the abode to a number of migratory birds. The sanctuary is a wetland situated at the mouth of tributary disang is of 33.93 hectare sq km and is just 22 km from the town. The sanctuary has a rich wetland ecosystem and declared as wild life sanctuary in 1996. Water is fed through channels of Demow, Boloma, Baliyan, and Singorajan. The sanctuary has seen as many as 160 species of different birds.

In a study conducted by Dutta and Konwar(2013) the location of Panidihing is daod like. It is the natural levee formation, embankment of the rivers Desang, Dimou and Brahmaputra and an adjoining Dhai Ali road has made the area water logged and moist.

The main beels of the wetland are Gorimari, Segunpara, Takai, Goboka, Singorijan, Gela Dimou Beel, Mora Disang, Balijan Beel, Kekrakhati Beel, Ketari Beel, Dighali and Phulai. Panidihing is now famous for its vast flocks of Bar-headed geese *Anser indicus* and Greylag geese, *A. anser*, and thousands of other waterfowl.

In addition to Panidihing, the district has a large number of water bodies. Most of the water bodies are artificial tanks of which most popular are the Joysagar tank, Rudrasagar tank, Gaurisagar tank and Sivasagar tank, excavated during the Ahom rule. A large number of migratory birds have been found to visit the tanks during winter. Some of the species recorded to have visited the tanks include greylag goose, airheaded goose, common teal, shoveller, tufted duck, etc (Ganguly, et.al:2008, Sonowal:2010). Chowdhury(1991) have recorded birds like Spot billed pelican, Black crowned night heron, Yellow bittern, Black bittern, Asian Open bill, Black stork, Black necked stork, Glossy ibis, Greylag goose, Lesser adjutant stork, Bar headed goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Mallard, Gadwall, Ferruginous Pochard, Cotton Pygmy Goose, Osprey, Eurasian Griffon, etc. These birds have been noted in and around Sibsagar tank, Joysagar tank, Phokolai and Dorou beels near Panidihing, besides Panidihing.s

Sivasagar is also known for its tea gardens. Bora and Meitei (2014) recorded a total of 104 species belonging to 72 genera under 5 families from five tea gardens viz., Maskara, Behuor, Bezbarua, Aideuari, and Bemolapur of Sivasagar. Out of the 104 butterfly species recorded, 3 are uncommon, 39 are common, 1 is very common, 12 are rare and 9 are very rare to the gardens in the study.

The district has been known in some of its villages for usage of indigenous medicines for treatment of various diseases. Some documented traditional medicines have been found as popular with the Mishing community of Dikhowmukh village in the district. Das and Pathak(2013) have documented twelve different types of plants which have been used as traditional medicines since long. Diseases treated with the plants include stomach ache, dysentery, tooth ache, etc. the drugs prepared from the plants are administered in the form of oral medicines, applicants, etc.

Herbal medicines used by the Tai-Khamyangs, better known as the Shyams in Charaideo sub-division of the district have been recorded in a study by Sonowal and Barua(2011). The findings

have been found to be interesting in that herbal medicines have been used to treat bone fractures, dog-bites, burn injuries, carbuncle, etc. the proportion of herbs use, the dosage, etc are learnt in generations by the practicing section of the people of the community.

Local communities in Mahmora region of the district have also been found to use as many as thirty-five varieties of plants for treatment of ailments like respiratory, gastrointestinal disorders, etc as has been recorded in Acharyya and Sharma (2004)

Such herbal medicines are unique to this part of the region and have been found to be largely successful in the treatments used.

Disangmukh is 10 km from Sivasagar, where river Disang joins the Brahmaputra. Disangmukh houses a number of migratory birds during winters. Boats can be hired to have a glimpse of the birds further up the river. Disangmukh has a major proportion of mishing community population. Majority of the houses in disangmukh are chang ghars. Disang festival is held in Sivsagar once in every two years at Disangmukh. Products of local self help groups and indigenous agricultural products are exhibited and sold in the festival. Rice beer, various delicacies of pork and dried fish are found in the festival. The festival provides a platform for empowering the locals through display and sale of local products.

An interesting yet lesser known art form practiced in specific locations of the district is of mask making. The art was introduced by Mohapurush Srimanta Sankardeva<sup>2</sup>. The practice is now confined to a few locations in Assam, of which Sivasagar is one. Only two satras<sup>3</sup> viz. Khatpar satra and the khatonipar satra still practices mask making. Moreover only two families in each of two satras are engaged in the form of art. Mostly prepared for the religious dance dramas, the commercialization of the masks have not been adequate primarily owing to the fact that the masks are used only as religious necessities. Diversifying into products can help the gradually vanishing form of art. The locations can be probable tourists' destinations within the district. The art can speak of the rich socio-religious values practised in the region.

<sup>2</sup> Mohapurush Srimanta Sakardeva has been an Assamese saint and scholar during 1449-1568. He founded and propagated panentheistic religion (one-God ) in Assam by the name 'Ekasarana dharma'. His preaching are a part of modern Assamese culture now.

<sup>3</sup> Satra(xatra) is a monastery like socio-religious institution in Assam. Satras were instituted for preaching the one-God religion in Assam

## 7. Limitations of the study

- a) The study is confined to very few aspects that could be in the district as an ecotourism destination.
- b) The study does not depict the possible entrepreneurial avenues for the locals of the district through ecotourism
- c) The study does not identify any model or structure incorporating the aspects stated for ecotourism within the district.
- d) The study does not point out the possibilities, if any, of relating historical tourism within ecotourism

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