Eco-Tourism Potentials at Tinsukia and Dibrugarh Districts of Upper Assam: Some Observations

"Anjan Kumar Bordoloi ** Rishi Bhargav Das *** Priyata Chetia

* Faculty Member, Department of Management, Margherita College, Margherita-786181, Tinsukia, Assam
** Lecturer cum Co-ordinator (Commerce), Directorate of Distance Education Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh-786004, Assam
*** Faculty Member, Department of Zoology, Margherita College, Margherita-786181, Tinsukia, Assam

ABSTRACT

The article presents the significance of Eco-Tourism in the present situation. It also focuses Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district of Assam as extremely potential places for Eco-Tourism in the economies of the North Eastern (NE) Region of India. The article also highlighted the entrepreneurial opportunities through Eco-Tourism to reinforce the local economy and points out the suggestions that can be taken in this direction.

Keywords : Eco-Tourism, Entrepreneurship Development, Potentialities

PRELUDE:

Tourism is considered as the major and the most diversified Industry in the world. Many countries take a responsible advantage of this dynamic Industry as a major source for income, employment, private sector growth, and infrastructure development. Tourism has long played an important role in the Indian economy as being the third most important Industry sector of national economy. Within the Tourism Industry worldwide, Eco-Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has recently estimated that Tourism is worth some $20 billion a year, and together with nature based Tourism, accounts for 20% of global international travel. In the Asia-Pacific region, Eco-Tourism has grown faster than any other form of Tourism and has therefore come to signify an attractive investment proposition.

Eco-Tourism in simple words means "Management of Tourism" and "Conservation of Nature" in a way so as to maintain a fine balance between the requirements of Tourism and ecology on one hand and the needs of local communities for jobs, new skills, income generating, employment and a better status for women on the other. The global importance of Eco-Tourism, its benefits as well as its impact was recognized with the launching of the year 2002 as the International year of Eco-Tourism (IYE) by the United Nations General Assembly. The IYE offers an opportunity to review Eco-Tourism experiences worldwide in order to consolidate tools and Internationalal framework that ensure its sustainable development in the future. This meant maximizing the economies, environmental and social benefits from Eco-Tourism, while avoiding its short comings and negative impact.

As a concept Eco-Tourism has gained momentum recently in India but as a way of life Indians have practiced Eco-Tourism since times immemorial by their traditional approach to nature and rich culture heritage. Eco-Tourism society in 1991 provided one of the earliest definitions. "Eco-Tourism is responsible travel to natural areas as to sustain the well being of local people."

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has defined it as "Tourism that involve traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specified object of studying, admiring and enjoying nature and its wild plants and animals, as well as existing cultural aspects (both of the past and the present) found in these areas."

ECO-TOURISM AND ASSAM:

Tourism in Assam is essentially nature based; therefore, national parks, wild life sanctuaries, rivers, lakes, hot water springs and thick wooded forest and wildlife are the major components of tourist attractions in Assam. It is counted as one of the prime Eco-Tourism destinations in India. Like other potential places in India, Assam too has high prospects as to develop it as a Tourism destination. Within the entire Assam region and beyond, much of the potentials for Tourism development falls within the scope of Eco-Tourism and provides possible activities which includes nature treks, village stays, tribal festivals and visits to smaller wildlife parks. Throughout the area, there are numerous natural resources that are unique and relatively unspoiled and by far its main attraction. Eco-Tourism as a concept is sustainable Tourism that focuses on minimal impact on the environment and local culture. The objective of Eco-Tourism is to generate income that can be used for the benefit of the local community and to conserve the local biodiversity. However, many of the natural and cultural resources are currently undeveloped and to cater to Eco-Tourism, little if any information on the natural and cultural history of the region is known throughout much of the rest of the world. Unfortunately, the areas ecological richness and culture diversity is also belied by social fragility and threatened by unsustainable industrial development that could quickly degrade it beyond any tourist trade.

Eco-Tourism in Assam attracts a large number of nature lovers and animal lovers who love to see colourful wildlife in their natural habitat. There are five National Parks and eleven...
wildlife and bird sanctuaries for protection and preservation of wildlife in the state. Kaziranga, for instance, has been receiving a steady flow of nature tourists for years. Other areas like Manas are increasingly touted as excellent destinations for bird watchers and nature trekkers. However what is required is expanding the Eco-Tourism market that includes destinations other than the popular wildlife sanctuaries, and innovative strategies to capitalize on this new trend.

**ECO-TOURISM AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT:**
Entrepreneurship plays an important role in developing and contributing to the opportunity for the entrepreneurs as due to increase tourist inflow to the economy of a county. It is related to the rapid industrialization. In India, entrepreneurship development has always been accepted as a strategy for achieving the twin objectives of promoting entrepreneurship and also speeding up rapid industrialization. Entrepreneurship through Eco-Tourism activities has tremendous opportunities in the state. In 2010 state received 15,157 foreign tourists against 14,942 foreign tourists in 2010. Considering the increase in flow of foreign tourists to the state year by year, entrepreneurs can take the opportunities of the market of the Eco-Tourism products. In both Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts of Assam, Eco-Tourism can be possibly one of the meaningful sources of economic development and job creation. Community-Based Eco-Tourism (CBET) in particular has been seen as a means to generate employment in this part of the State that boasts of several ethnic tribes. The aim is to showcase the culture of these communities while preserving it.

**ECO-TOURISM POTENTIALITIES AT TINSUKIA AND DIBRUGARH DISTRICTS OF UPPER ASSAM:**
The Tinsukia District of Assam is bountiful rich in bio-diversity, especially the Dehing Patkai Region. It falls under the Indo-Burma hotspot, which is one of the twenty-five richest bio-diversity hotspots of the world. The Indo-Burma hotspot comprises about 2 million square kilometers of tropical Asia, east of the Indian Sub-Continent. Geographically the region encompasses a large area covering the districts of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh in Assam and a part of Arunachal Pradesh (the Districts in it are Tirap, Changlang, and lower Dibang valley). The whole tract of land covering the two banks of the river “Buriheing” (a branch of the river ‘Diyan’ that originates from the Patkai range and bifurcates near Miao on Arunachal Pradesh) is the Dehing Patkai Region. On being bifurcated, one branch of the river ‘Diyan’ viz. “Nao Dehing” reaches the river Luhit, while the other “Buriheing” dips down into the great Brahmaputra. The history of Assam and that of the World is closely related to this region. The Dehing Patkai region comes under the country’s richest “North East Bio-geographic zone” and “Brahmaputra valley biotic province.” It is a part of the world bio-diversity hotspot. The whole region is the home land of several hundred species of plants, animals, birds and orchids, which include several rare and unique varieties too. The Government of Assam by a notification dated 19th June 2004 declared creation of the ‘Dehing Patkai wildlife sanctuary’ covering a part of the Greater Dehing Patkai region falling within the territory of Assam under the Diboi and Dibrugarh forest divisions. The whole area of Dehing Patkai is fabricated with a large number of ethnic tribes. They mostly belong to Mongolian blood and are socio-culturally related to the South East Asian Countries like Thailand and Cambodia. In addition to these ethnic tribes of Mongolian origin, tea tribes and various non-tribal communities live in this vast area from time immemorial with their respective socio-cultural practices.

Referring to a Tai-Phake community of Phaneng village near Lekhapani, a nondescript tribal village of Tinsukia district under Dehing Patkai belt has been doing a noble work for the upliftment of Eco-Tourism sector in the State. With a vision, the small community without any help from the Government agencies transformed the remote and jungle village into a spot of attraction for foreign and foreign tourists. Tourists from Japan, Thailand, Australia, Zimbabwe, and UK had already visited Phaneng to share the noble works done by the small tribe of this village. Not only in Phaneng but in the places like Inthem, Guijan, and Saikhowa of Tinsukia District of Assam it has been seen that Eco-Tourism activities are gradually developing.

The Tourism potentiality of the Tinsukia district of Assam is immense with a combination of human, natural, cultural, ethnic beauty, religious attractions, heritage sites and deep forests. Most foreign travelers look for ethnic and culture mosaic, adventure and Eco-Tourism while a domestic tourist is enthused by religious attractions, wildlife and fauna. In all these areas the Dehing Patkai Region of the Tinsukia District of Assam has tremendous scope for attraction. To mention a few, one can enjoy the socio-cultural life style (their food-habit, dress, ornaments, religious practices, games and sports etc.) of the large numbers of the tribes like Singphos, Nocetes, Tai Phakes, Wangchos, Tangsas, Sonowals, Kacharis, Duanias, Khamlis, Deoris, Sema Nagas and many more in addition to those of non-tribals like Ahoms, Morans, Maktaks, Tea communities, Nepali etc. The ethnic festival viz. Dehing Patkai festival organized every year at Lekhapani under the Margherita Sub-Division in the Tinsukia district of Assam since the year 2002 is a unique opportunity for the tourists to enjoy (as if under the same roof) the diverse cultural and heritage mosaic of various ethnic tribes and integrated cultural pattern in a spirit of unity in diversity. Such facilities i.e., providing lodging, fooding and proper guiding for the visiting tourist, exhibiting art and crafts and cultural displays shall definitely promote entrepreneurship in the region. In this context refers to the Singhpo Eco-Lodge in Dibang valley, which is around seven kilometers from Margherita under Dehing Patkai belt of Tinsukia district of Assam, was inaugurated in October 2008. A long driveway through tea bushes lead to the thatched building situated among the lush green forests. The Singhpo house on stilts. The lodge has eleven spacious double bedrooms, one separate kitchen, and one large dining hall, which follows the low seating pattern. Eager to tap into the immense potential of Eco-Tourism, a group of youths formed the Singhpo Community-Based Eco-Tourism Society (SCETs) in 2002. With some help from the DS Group Limited, they set out to build a lodge at Inthong village, which has a predominantly Nepali population. Agriculture is the chief occupation here and most houses have tea gardens. A striking feature that marks out the Singhpo huts from the others, the leaves of which can be plucked only after climbing a step ladder. The SCETs earmarked two bighas of land for the lodge. The completion of the lodge took some time due to financial constraints. The grant of Rs 11 lakh by the DS Group Ltd fell short and the members of the society had to dig into their own pockets. After some delay, the lodge opened to visitors on 8th October, 2008.

Dibrugarh is a major gateway of Upper Assam and is an important commerical hub of the state. It serves as the headquarters of the Dibrugarh district, Assam and is very often referred to as the ‘Tea City of India’, as it accounts for a major share of the total tea production of the country. The city derives its name from Diburuickh, which means from
In Dibrugarh district another excellent destination for Eco-Tourism is Tai Phakey Eco-Tourism Camp which considered being the ultimate destination for wildlife lovers. Away from concrete and crowds, the camp offers plenty of opportunities to refresh one’s mind and get thrilled with unfold mystery of the nature. A group of young entrepreneurs are running this venture and earning their livelihood.

In Dibrugarh one of the most important mega Eco-Tourism Projects is Sasoni-Merbeel project which is considered to be the first Community Based Eco-Tourism (CBET) project of the State was inaugurated on July, 2011. For the development of this project Rs. 2 Crores is earmarked under the MNREGA Scheme and also has been partially financed by Oil India Ltd., Dullajan with active involvement of local community. The horse shoe shaped Merbeel wet land is a habitat of different species of birds, reptiles including Siberian crane and python respectively and is also endowed with rich aquatic flora and fauna. Spread over five square kilometers, the wetland is located in the Sasoni Mouza and is connected to the nearby Buri-Dehing river. The salient features of attraction of Eco-Tourism project at Sasoni-Merbeel are bird watching tower, environment camp, boating etc. Conservation of wild animals is also an imminent part of the plan.

Thus it gives an indication that Eco-Tourism in general and Community Based Eco-Tourism (CBET) in particular is very much supportive in the promotion of entrepreneurship in these two districts.

EPILOGUE:
From the above discussion it can be concluded that both these districts have tremendous opportunities for promotion of Eco-Tourism. And in order to make Eco-Tourism a more effective tool for sustainable community development in these two districts the following issues should be noted:

• More market research is essential to appreciate and to evaluate the international market for Eco-Tourism.
• Eco-Tourism enterprises need separate title within tourism ministry and it must be protected according to the tourism laws which apply to standard tourism businesses.
• Partnerships between communities, governments, NGOs and the private tourism sector have to be enhanced. The strengths of each partner must be used in a more efficient way and greater coordination between the partners will be necessary.
• National Eco-Tourism strategies are supposed to be established by individual governments. Specific Eco-Tourism development zones should be shaped.
• The issues of participation and distribution of benefits must be evaluated before starting a project and should be reviewed every year. All agreements between the different parties should be approved by the elected community authority and written down in a simple, yet legally compulsory document.
• Development organizations should provide soft loans, assistance with fundraising and other forms of long-term credit needed by communities to help them establish their own tourism programs.

Despite of certain problems, there is a every reason to believe that Eco-Tourism can bring improvements in sustainability standards for commerce in areas that traditionally have had few development options, that it can help governments diversify and strengthen their Tourism economies, and it can assist communities with finding new formulas for gaining social contracts that respect their culture, intellectual property, and legal rights.
REFERENCES