



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

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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 international 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.

ECO-TOURISM AS A CONCEPT:

Tourism as we know is currently the world largest industry and Eco-Tourism represents the fastest growing part of this market. Tourism is by now the largest source of foreign exchange in countries like Costa Rica and Belize and also in Guatemala. Eco-Tourism may offer one way of striking this critical balance. Well planned Eco-Tourism can benefit both political areas and residents of surroundings communities by linking long term bio-diversity conservation with local, social and economic development. Eco-Tourism has recently come to be regulated as the "panacea" that enables as to aggressively seek 'Tourism dollars' with no obvious damage to eco-system, since wild resources are not being harvested and there is no apparent associated development.

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 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 treks. 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 2009. Considering the increase inflow 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 bountifully rich in bio-diversity, especially the Dehing Patkai Region. It falls under 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 'Buridehing' (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 "Buridehing" dips down into the great Brahmaputra. The history of Assam and that of the World War II are very closely related to this area. 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 Digboi 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 including Myanmar. 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 great vision, the small community without any help from the Government agencies transformed the remote and jungle village into a spot of attraction for home 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 flora 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, Noctes, Tai Phakes, Wangchhos, Tangsas, Sonowals, Kacharis, Duanias, Khamtis, Deoris, Sema Nagas and many more in addition to those of non-tribals like Ahoms, Morans, Mat-tacks, 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. The lush green valleys and scenic splendour of this area covering the geographical areas of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts and South-Eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh, cast spell on visitors. The lush green rain forest patch of Joypur, Dirok and Upper Dehing located within a radius of 100 k.m. from Tinsukia town are ideal for a wide variety of flora and fauna as also for trekking. 'Roing' the Headquarter of lower Dibang valley District of Arunachal Pradesh is still another place of tourist's attraction with versatile opportunities of living an eco-friendly life. Thus the whole region of the Tinsukia District of Assam has tremendous potentiality for furthering Eco-Tourism development. Hence the area also has tremendous scope for entrepreneurship development.

Eco-Tourism can be taken as the best option in areas of Dehing Patkai region of Tinsukia district of Assam which is owned and managed by a community and takes care of their natural resources in order to gain income through better their lives. It involves conservation of the nature, development of business enterprises and community development to a great extent and such facilities i.e., providing lodging, fooding and proper guidance to the visiting tourist, exhibiting art and crafts and cultural displays shall definitely promote entrepreneurship in the region. In this context referring to a Singpho Ecolodge at Inthong village, 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 built along the lines of a traditional Singpho 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 Singpho Community-Based Eco-Tourism Society (SCES) in 2006. 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 Singpho houses here are the tall tea bushes, the leaves of which can be plucked only after climbing a stepladder. The SCES 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 commercial centre 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 Dibarumukh, which means from

the 'mouth (mukh) of the river Dibraru or Dibru'. Dibrugarh was a very famous encampment of the Ahom Dynasty during the Ahom Chutia war. Dibrugarh is situated on the banks of the vast river Brahmaputra and is bounded on the north by Dhemaji district, on the east by Tinsukia district, on the southeast by Arunachal Pradesh and on the north and southwest by Sibsagar district. The city is mainly formed by the Brahmaputra and its major tributary, the Buri-Dehing, and has an altitude ranging between 99 and 474 meters. The entire region can be divided into three zones - the active floodplains and charland, the middle plains and the southern foothills. The foothills consist of isolated hills, which are composed mainly of lateritic soils. This is particularly suitable for the cultivation of tea and hence, the entire area can be seen dotted by tea gardens and dense forests. A major event in the history of the region was the vicious earthquake in 1950, which claimed the lives of thousands of people in the city. Although the city was rebuilt after the devastating earthquake, its impressions can still be seen in certain areas of the city. With such an exquisite landscape, the city has much to offer in terms of attractions or tourists spots for travelers and nature lovers. The major places to visit in and around Brahmaputra are Koli Aai Thaan, Barbarua Maidam, Bogibil Bridge, Dibru Saikhowa Park and the Sarumechow-Bornemchow Maidam. Apart from this, there are a number of Satras around the region, depicting a strong influence of the Vaishnav culture and customs. Modern Dibrugarh has progressed rapidly economically and also educationally. It is often regarded as the education hub of Upper Assam. Dibrugarh University and a number of other such reputed institutions have been established in the city, with the idea of promoting better and enhanced education to the masses. Dibrugarh is a very important tourist destination of Assam. It is also the commercial hub of the state.

In addition to the numerous attractions found within Dibrugarh, there are a number of tourist places at a short distance from the city, a visit to which will definitely add to the traveler's experience. In fact, a trip to Dibrugarh without visiting these nearby exotic destinations, also known as excursions, is almost futile. The city of Dibrugarh is well connected with the other regions of Assam as well as with the rest of India by well maintained airways, railways and roadways. The city is, in fact, regarded as the major gateway of Upper Assam and as such the airport, the rail station and the bus stand remain crowded all throughout the year. Dibrugarh city is one of the popular tourist destinations in Assam. To explore the Eco-Tourism potential at Dibrugarh district of Assam, rainforest festival is being organized at Jeypore, Dibrugarh. The highlights of the festival are to display ethnic artifacts and cuisines of various communities. The visitors engaged themselves in elephant rides, boat rides, trekking and bird watching trips.

In Dibrugarh district of Assam Nam-Phake village an exotic destination for Eco-Tourism four kilometers away from Naharkatiya and 65 Kms from Dibrugarh town in Assam. Spread three-odd kilometers along the bank of river Dehing, a tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra, the picturesque village has an enticing old-charm. It is the largest of the Tai-Phake villages in Assam, boasting 70 odd families, which trace their ancestry to the great Tai race. The people of the village provide excellent hospitality to the visitors and earning their livelihood from their different services. The salient features of attraction of Eco-Tourism project at Nam-Phake village are sunset, boating in the river Buri-dehing, Pagoda built in 1937, Buddhist Monastery, Symbolic Ashoka pillar, Nong Mungchringta ((Musilinda Tank), traditional stilt house, traditional dances like Kakong (Drum Dance), Kapan (Welcome Dance), Kachong (Umbrella Dance) and Ka-Feefai (Diamond Dance).

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., Duliajan with active involvement of local community. The horse shoe shaped Merbeel wet land is a habitat of different species of birds and 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 laws and regulations allowing them to lawfully manage tourism without the same system and tax structures that 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.

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