



**A STUDY ON THE PROSPECTS AND POTENTIALITIES OF ETHNO-TOURISM
IN THE DISTRICT OF TINSUKIA, ASSAM**

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ABSTRACT

Tourism today is one of the largest service industries in the world. Today, tourism is a multi-billion dollar industry and the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. Tourism has become one of the major players in international commerce, and has become one of the major sources of revenue and employment generation. The economy of many countries is entirely dependent upon its tourism industry.

In India, Tourism is an important sector and contributes substantially in the country's Foreign Exchange Earnings. Foreign Exchange Earnings from tourism during 2011 were Rs.77591 crore (provisional), with a growth of 19.6%, as compared to the FEEs of Rs.64889 crore (provisional) during 2010. During 2012, the Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) from tourism registered a growth of 21.8% from Rs.77591 to Rs.94487 crore (provisional) when compared to FEEs during 2011.

With advancement in communication, technologies, and policies of the government, the consumer trends in tourism is gradually changing and therefore require an appropriate response in terms of both policy formulation and investment. The current market trends indicate the following:

- Long haul travel will grow faster than intra-regional travel. A growth of 24% is expected by 2020.
- People with less time for leisure are likely to take more frequent but shorter trips nearer home, opening up opportunities for "neighboring country tourism".
- The experience traveler wants authentic, off-the-beaten track vacation against luxurious 5-star vacations, leading to an interest in rural and ethnic tourism.
- The increase in the number of people with lots of money but little leisure time has resulted in a growing emphasis on rest and relaxation, and 'wellness' and 'health' holidays.
- The elderly population has shown a preference for cultural tourism.
- There is a notable and increasing interest in spiritualism.
- The demand for eco-tourism and nature based holidays is expected to double and even triple in the next 20 years.
- Sports and adventure holidays continue to be popular with the young.

If we examine the above-mentioned indications of present market trend, we can determine that tourists with interest in culture, spiritualism, nature and ethnicity would tend to favor India, provided the country can avail of the opportunities offered to maximize its natural advantages in these areas.

ETHNO TOURISM- MEANING:

The New Economic Policy introduced in India in 1991 has affected the culture of indigenous people in many ways. Today, their culture is in different stages of development and change due to various challenges coming from inside and outside.

However, there are still such places in India where indigenous communities have maintained their

age-old culture and tradition. Today, the government with various aid agencies and private partners has tried to help indigenous communities develop sustainable tourism industries that have contributed towards the emergence of the concept of "ethno tourism".

Traditionally, only the environmental issues associated with travel have grabbed the lion's share of attention from governments, the tourism industry and the media. Yet, an increasing number of countries are beginning to work to ensure that tourism not only protects the environment but also benefits indigenous people, in a trend referred to as "ethno-tourism" or "community based eco-tourism".

In simple terms, we can define 'ethno-tourism' as "*tourism activities centered on an indigenous group of people and their culture*".

If we go through the above definition, we can determine two important elements of ethno tourism:

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES:

"Indigenous communities, people and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sections of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system."-United Nation, 2004.

Following are the distinguishing features of an indigenous community:

- Occupation of ancestral lands or parts of them.
- Indigenous communities today form non-dominant sectors of the society.
- They reside on certain parts of the country, or in certain regions of the world.
- Population is declining and there is a threat of extinction to their language, rituals, dress, music, literature, etc.

CULTURE: "Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."-UNESCO (2002).

PROSPECTS AND POTENTIALITIES OF TINSUKIA AS AN ETHNO-TOURISM DESTINATION

Tinsukia, the easternmost district of Assam with an area of 3790 sq.km and a population of 1150062 (census 2001) is a potential destination where ethno-tourism can flourish in a big way. It is an industrial district, yet it produces a sizeable amount of tea, oranges, citrus fruits and paddy. It is well connected by air, national highway and railway.

It is mentioned in the history that hordes of migratory tribes of the mongoloid called 'kirata' in the ancient Indian scriptures were drifted to Assam through this region. It was in Assam and its neighboring region that these tribes were absorbed. Literary and ethnological sources indicated that the early waves of the mongoloid migration entered India in the east before 1000 B.C. at about the same prehistoric times as the arrive of Aryans in the west. These migratory tribes included Tai Phake, Tai Khamti, Mantai, Singpo, Wangsho, Nocte, Tai Turung, Tangsha, etc. With passage of time Tai Ahoms, Tea Tribes, Bodos, Sonowal-Kacharis, Mishings became the part and parcel of this region.

Today, Tinsukia is the meeting ground of various ethnic tribes such as Tai Phake, Tai Khamyang, Sema Naga, Tangsha, Singpo, Deori, Mishing, Sonowal-Kachari, and non-tribal such as Moran, Muttack, Ahom, Tea tribe, etc. All these tribes are living in this part of the country with peace, tranquility, and unity maintaining their distinct culture and tradition from time immemorial.

WHY PROMOTE ETHNO-TOURISM?

- 1) **AWARENESS:** Promotion of ethno-tourism would create awareness among people about the various ethnic tribe(s) living in a particular region. This would attract tourists to visit these tribes and create a sense of ethnic pride among these tribal people and would encourage them to display their culture and tradition before the world arena.
- 2) **INCREASED INCOME:** The domestic as well as foreign tourists choose to come to ethnic communities to see their life styles, to enjoy their various festivals and ceremonies, to taste ethnic cuisines, to buy their hand made products, all things that had no economic value at all in the past. All these activities has contributed towards increased income of the communities and resulted in economic stability.
- 3) **IMPROVEMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE:** Tourism demands well developed infrastructures. Tourism stimulates investment in improved infrastructures. With increasing tourism activities, it is found that road conditions are improving, new rail tracks were commissioned and new airfields and flights to new destinations were introduced improving the whole communication system.
- 4) **PAVE WAY FOR RESEARCHERS:** Promotion of ethno tourism would pave way for various research projects especially among anthropologists and ethnologist in order to throw light on the various aspects of these ethnic tribes.
- 5) **PRESERVATION:** Promotion would throw light on the existence of such ethnic tribes whose existence might be in danger due to reasons like declining population; influence of other cultures on their dialects, dress code; loss of ancestral land, etc. This would attract both government agencies and

NGOs to take necessary steps to help these tribes preserve their distinct culture and tradition.

If we do an S.W.O.T analysis of Tinsukia district in order to determine its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in relation to tourism then we can find out the following:

1) STRENGTHS:

- Blessed by Mother Nature, Tinsukia is a district with immense scenic beauty.
- Tribes, fabulous culture, and bewildering festivals make it a best haunt.
- With a good number of endangered and endemic species flora and fauna Tinsukia has huge potentials to develop itself as a wildlife destination of India.
- Good number of technical and non-technical people is available as work force.

2) WEAKNESSES:

- Image Problem: Tinsukia is quite unpopular for its insurgency activities.
- Lack of Awareness: Low awareness among people about various tourism products.
- Connectivity: Poor roads, underdeveloped water system have been a constraint.
- Allocation of Insufficient fund for tourism developmental activities by the government.
- Increasing corruption in almost all the government departments.

3) OPPORTUNITIES:

- Government of India is giving special attention to northeast region and Tinsukia is going to benefit from this.
- Asian Development Bank is preparing a sub-regional plan for development of tourism covering Bhutan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal, NER figures prominently in this plan because of the Asian Highway. Reopening of Stilwell Road in the near future will connect Tinsukia along with NER with rest of Southeast Asian countries.
- Presently the state has attracted private investment from around the globe and there is probability that it would attract more such investments, which will benefit the whole tourism industry.

4) THREATS:

- Terrorism is a major setback of the district.
- Corruption leading to miss utilization of resources meant for developmental activities.
- Lack of promotional activities to highlight Tourism potentialities of the district.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROMOTION AND PRESERVATION OF ETHNO TOURISM IN TINSUKIA

Following suggestions may be considered for promotion of ethno tourism in the district of Tinsukia:

- 1) Although Tinsukia has huge potentialities to emerge itself as an ethno tourism destination of the country but still due to lack of proper promotional measures by the government as well as by NGOs it has failed to do so. Initiative by professional institutions and individuals to promote Tinsukia in various print Medias and social medias would surely help learn people about its potentialities
- 2) Initiative by the government as well as NGOs to celebrate the colorful festivals of the various ethnic communities of the district in a big and professional way would surely attract tourists from around the globe.

- 3) Educational tours organized by various organizations among students would create awareness as well as eagerness to learn more about these ethnic tribes.
- 4) Cultural exchanges between the various ethnic tribes of Tinsukia and Southeast Asian countries would strengthen the age-old bond of unity among them.
- 5) Proper research by various institutions and individuals on the ethnic tribes of Tinsukia would throw light on the various aspects of their life and problems associated with their survival.

Tourism can play a major role in improving the economic condition of Northeast Region as a whole and Tinsukia in particular. It can contribute a lot towards improving the unemployment scenario of the state and enable the region to have a good amount of foreign earnings. Proper initiative by the government towards developing tourism and making the people aware of the various tourism products would contribute towards making NER as the dream destination of every tourist.

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