

Positioning Of Assam as a Culturally Rich Destination: Potentialities and Prospects

Deepjoonalee Bhuyan

Date of Submission: 22-03-2020

Date of Acceptance: 08-04-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism has a special place in India because of its past civilisation. Among the various motivating factors governing travel in India, cultural tourism is undoubtedly the most important. For any foreigner, a visit to India must have a profound cultural impact and in its broader sense, tourism in India involves quite a large content of cultural content. It also plays a major role in increasing national as well as international good will and understanding. Thousands of archaeological and historical movements scattered throughout the country provide opportunities to learn about the ancient history and culture.

India has been abundantly rich in its cultural heritage. Indian arts and crafts, music and dance, fairs and festivals, agriculture and forestry, astronomy and astrology, trade and transport, recreation and communication, monumental heritage, fauna and flora in wildlife and religion play a vital role in this type of tourism. Thus, it can be very well said that there remains a lot of potential for the progress of cultural tourism in India. Culturally, North East represents the Indian ethos of 'unity in diversity' and 'diversity in unity'. It is a mini India where diverse ethnic and cultural groups of Aryans, Dravidians, Indo-Burmese, Indo Tibetan and other races have lived together since time immemorial.

The religious heritage, tantric leanings of Ma Kamakhya, black magic tradition of Mayang, unique specimens of ancient art and architecture, various festivals and diverse culture of various communities give Assam a unique advantage in promoting heritage and cultural tourism.

Religious heritage

The Brahmaputra valley was once littered with a plethora of temples. Most of the holy shrines of Assam are associated with interesting legends. Some of these legends are fictitious but many of them are based either on historical facts or on some local incidents. A good number of Hindu places of worship are related to Indian mythology and even to Epics and Purans. For those with a religious bent of mind, Guwahati, Nagaon, Majuli, Sibsagar, Sadiya and Tezpur can be a soul cleaning experience.

Majuli is a centre place of Vaishnavite culture. Apart from Majuli, Borduar, Samaguri, Borpetta and Madhupur are other attractive places for the religious and spiritual lovers. Mention may be made of Dikrayasini or Kesai Khati and Parashuram Kunda of Sadiya, Mahamaya temple of Dhubri and Kamakhya temple of Guwahati, Mahavairabh temple in Tezpur the temples of Sivasagar, Burigosani than at Deopani, the Tilinga temple at Bordubi (Tinsukia) the Athkhelia Namghar in Golaghat, the Dhekiakhuwa Namghar and Mainya Puria Namghar in Jorhat are some of the religious places for the Hindus.

Disangpani Vihar of Sivasagar, Borphakial Vihar, Dibang Vihar and Katateng Vihar of Margherita are some of the religious places for the Buddhists, Ajan Pir Dorgah Sharif in Sivasagar district and Pua Macca of Hajo are the religious places of the Muslims.

Architeturial Remains

The history of art and architecture in Assam is as old as the history of human settlement in this region during the pre history period. Some famous sites containing the remains of the architecture in ancient Assam are Tezpur (Dah Parbatya), Jogighopa in Goalpara district (stone caves on the bank of Brahmaputra), stupa like structures at Surya Pahar and rock caves of Pancharatna near Goalpara, North Cachar Hills (carving of human figures on stones) Cachar (Bhuvan Cave) etc. The architectural remains of medieval period are found in North Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Guwahati, Hajo, North Cachar hill, Dhubri, Karimganj etc. The architectural remains found in these places belong to the various royal dynasties such as Kachari, Koches, Ahoms, Chutiyas etc.

Art and Craft of Assam

The magic of art of Assamese craftsmen is a common passion inspiring the deep sense with its age old simplicity and sophistication. Though Assam is renowned for its exquisite silks, Assamese craftsmen still retain some of the crafts of the past through such activities as weaving, bamboo, cane, bell metal, pith craft, clay and wood works and ivory carvings. The craft of weaving can certainly surpass the work of the weavers of many other parts of the world. Their work reflects distinctive colour, scheme and artistic design. Assamese traditional jewellery is famous for its enamelling, embossing and incising valuable stones and jewels in gold and silver ornaments. The designs generally constitute objects of nature. Barpeta and Jorhat are famous for this art. The colorful Assamese Japi (headgear) terracotta of Gauripur and various decorative items bear witness to the craftsmanship of this land. Dance, music, woodwork, pottery, setalpatis the art of mat making have survived through centuries with few changes.

II. FLORA AND FAUNA:

Assam has rich flora that is valued as important flowering species. As many as 293 species of orchids are found in Assam. The Kopouphul (fox tail orchid) enjoys such huge popularity amongst the Assamese people that this orchid flower has become the symbol of Assamese culture. Apart from the orchids, Assam has a large number of other plant species which produce flowers with great ornamental value and can be a source of attraction to a tourist who have a passion for flowers. Apart from floral wealth, Assam has many highly prized medicinal plants. Medicinal plants have been the corner-stone of medical therapies for thousands of years and they continue to be an essential part of health-care through out the world. These plants have been used in the ayurvedic unani and other traditional / alternative medicinal systems since time immemorial. The state with its many ethnic communities has a rich traditional pool of knowledge regarding the medicinal value and propagation of these plants.

III. FAIRS AND FESTIVALS:

Assam's culture has a rich heritage of fairs and festivals which are celebrated by her people in great merriment including the tribes, other communities and people in general. The fairs and festivals reflect the true spirit, tradition and lifestyle of the people of Assam. The culture of Assam is a rich tapestry with multi colour yarns of distinct heritage of all the races that inhabit there.

The perfect fusion of heritage of her tribes and sub-tribes have made Assam the house of the most colourful festivals, at once passionate compelling and mesmerising.

As the economy of all indigenous communities is basically agricultural, most of the fairs and festivals held in the state are intimately connected with agriculture.

The major festivals celebrated in Assam are -

1. Bihu : (Bohag Bihu - a spring time festival celebrated in mid-April; Kati Bihu : an autumn festival celebrated in November and Magh Bihu : a post harvest festival celebrated in mid-January)
2. Baishagu - It is celebrated by the Bodo Kacharis as a spring time festival during mid-April.
3. Ali-aye-Ligang : a spring time festival of the Mishing tribe celebrated in (Feb. - March)
4. Rongker : It is celebrated by the Karbis of Karbi Anglong in mid-April.
5. Baikha : a spring time festival of the Rabhas.
6. Rajani Gabra and Harni Gabra : socio religious festivals of the Dimasas.
7. Bohaggio Bihu : a fascinating spring festival of the Deoris celebrated in mid-April.
8. The Sagra Misawa Wansava and Laghum - a cultural festival of the Tiwas.
9. The Kherai Puja : a primitive ritual of the Bodos.

Another major community of Assam is the tea community. They have a synthesised form of dance called Jhumur and their festival 'Tusu Puja' coincides with Magh Bihu - the harvest festival of Assam. The Singphos too have a rich folk dance tradition related to various festivals and occasions

Apart from the secular festivals, some purely religious festivals are also celebrated in Assam which can attract tourists. Among them -

1. The Ambubachi Mela (fair) of Kamakhya temple during June.
2. The Siva Ratri fairs of Umananda, Joypur, Sivasagar and Singori during February.
3. Deodhani or Devaddhani is another important festival celebrated at Kamakhya in the month of August where the dance of Deodhani is displayed.
4. Doul Yatra : a festival celebrated in Barpeta in March.
5. The Raas Mahotsav : It is celebrated in the world's largest river island Majuli and showcases the arts, craft and lifestyles shaped by the unique Vaishnav Satras. It is celebrated in November.

6. A unique type of drama festival the **Baresaharia Bhaona** is organised at Jamuguri, Sonitpur District in every 4 years in the month of April

7. Joonbil Mela : This spectacular fair is held every year at Joonbil, Jagiroad 32 kms from Guwahati. In this mela, tribes like the Tiwas Karbi of Assam and Khasis and Jaintias from neighbouring Meghalaya come down from the hills with their various products and hold a bazaar (haat) in the plains of Assam and in this bazaar, these tribes exchange their products with the local people in the barter system which is very rare in a civilised modern society. Some other festivals which are a welcome step in positioning Assam as a cultural rich tourist destination are -

1. The Tea festival held in Jorhat in January / February, where one can enjoy jungle safaris, golf, horse racing, ethnic food festival and cultural extravaganza.

2. Dehing - Patkai festival (Lekhapani - June 16-19) - It is a heady cocktail of ethni fairs, golfing, tea heritage-tours, adventure-sports, wildlife excursions and down memory lane trips to World War II cemeteris and the Stillwell road, once a passage to Myanmar.

3. Brahmaputra Beach Festival - (Guwahati Jan 13-15)

Coinciding with Magh Bihu the Assamese harvest festival, this festival offers a tourist scintillating outdoor experience on the river beaches of mighty Brahmaputra.

4. Disang festival - Desangmukh, Sivasagar

5. Elephant festival - Kaziranga.

All these festivals are of great importance from the tourism point of mew. So coinciding with the festivals that are held in the tourist season, (Dec.- April) the tourists can have a first hand experience of the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Assam.

Performing Arts:

Since historical past, Assam has been a land of dance and music. Many of the religious functions are found to be associated with dance performances. Devadasi dance once performed in the temples of Assam is still practised in the Porihoreswar temple located at Pathsala in the eastern part of Barpeta district. Ojha Pali is another traditional performing art which combines dance with narrative singing performed in Kamrup, Nalbari and Darrang districts. Some typical folk dance forms like Hanaghora, Parabral and Bagejari are found in Kamrup district.

The Satriya dance a devotional classical dance has already received recognition as one of the classical dance form of India Bhaona is another performing art depicting various mythological stories through action, dance, music and dialogue

Dhuliya Oja is performed in Barpeta Nalbari and Kamrup district Assam has a rich tradition of puppetry. Darrang (Kalaigoan) Nalbari, Kokrajhar, Nagoan and Hojai are some of the places where indigenous puppet shows are performed mainly in winter. So, such a rich treasure house of colourful performing art forms can definitely satisfy a tourist having interest in such aspects of regional art and culture.

IV. CONSTRAINTS AND SUGGESTIONS TO PROMOTE TOURISM AND CONCLUSION:

1. Inadequacy of infrastructure and poor quality of infrastructure is one of the most nagging bottlenecks of tourism. The govt of Assam should provide for clean and comfortable lodging facilities at reasonable rates and make arrangements for trained guides and tourist amenities of international standard in major places of tourist attraction.

2. Shortage of manpower is a serious handicap and therefore excellence of services makes the crucial difference.

3. Publicity through brochures about the various cultural depictions is a very effective means of reaching out to the people. A satisfied tourist is a country's best publicity. Similarly, an unhappy experience of tourists can ruin years of image building exercise. Hassles of travel in Assam is a major constraint of tourist promotion.

4. Creating awareness about the importance of tourism is an important element of tourism action plan. Once an awareness campaign is generated, a culture of tourism will emerge. Such awarness and emergence of a tourism friendly culture in tune with our old philosophy "Vasudhava Kutumbakam" can be possible only if the people actively participate and share the vision of the govt about the much dimensioned role of tourism.

5. A 'Souvenir' shop can be set up at the entry and exit points of a tourist destination. Beautifully produced tourist information books which can serve as souvenirs to be taken away, replicas of important monuments etc. picture postcards, handicraft items, small momentos can be sold in such shops.

6. The traditional villages of Assam also offer the tourists a chance to have a first hand experience of the idyllic countrylife of Assam. By spending some time in the villages, one can get a lot of insight into the traditions, customs, culture and lifestyle of the local people.

7. Kameshwari festival is a festival celebrated in the Kamakhya temple which hasn't received adequate focus. Started in 2007, keeping with the traditions of gayan, bayan and nartakis form of worship at the Kamakhya temple in ancient times, this festival is organised by the Kamakhya Debattor Board. The authorities should take

some steps to make it an internationally recognised classical dance and music festival similar to the Khaju Raho festival of Madhya Pradesh. This festival may be considered as an attempt to create tourist attraction by using the temple.

8. Food Festival is an effective way in which an entire holiday experience can be built around a local meal. There is a special pleasure in eating in a thali or in having tea in a mud khullar, traditional jalpan (breakfast) in a bell metal bowl or traditional Assamese pitha on a banana leaf. The tribal people Assam produce alcoholic liquor from rice. This home made beer type drinks have many positive effects. These drinks can also be included in the food festival. However this festival should be done through appropriate decor, music, serving style and of course authentically flavoured specialities.

9. To attract foreign and domestic tourists, the Govt. of Assam may take initiatives to organise tourist carnivals. Heritage tourism in Assam is still in its nascent stage. Though some bungalows have already been transformed into heritage hotels, more bungalows need to be added to the list.

10. Assam has a rich heritage of medicinal plant bio-diversity as pointed out earlier. It is a potentially hot spot for medicinal plant resources. The plants have already been used for ayurvedic, unani and traditional type of treatment. At present, Jorhat has been projected as a centre for orthopaedic treatment namely for joining of fractured bones through the use of the 'haarjura lota'. The cure of such diseases such as jaundice, hydrophobia have been used by the use of medicinal plants but it lacks the popularity it owes. So, such places rich in varied plant resources need to be located and effective measures chalked out.

11. Information about tourism in Assam should be made available in the embassies in New Delhi and diplomatic offices in major Indian cities. The websites created by Assam tourism should be updated by giving all the details of information on tourism. Assam has to market tourism aggressively. "One will have to go out and sell, instead of waiting for the customers to come and buy in a market of stiff competition."

12. There should be provision for musical entertainment to the tourists staying in the hotels and tourist bungalows in important tourist places like Kaziranga and Guwahati, so that the evenings are delightful and the tourists can be enriched by the cultural contours of the region.

13. The Directorate of Tourism and ATDC should take steps by purchasing space in national dailies focussing on the attractive places at least once in a year just before the onset of the peak period of tourism in the state.

14. On the lines of the desert festival in Rajasthan, the ATDC can organise spring festival on the courtyard of the historic Ranghar. The festival should be made enchanting with the presentation of songs and dances of the region, joyable with various dishes and colourful with the display of various folk dresses and handicrafts.

Therefore, on the line of the above write-up, Assam has all the potentials of a culturally rich tourist destination but all we need is a proper propagation of the prospects of tourism to the domestic and foreign customers.

REFERENCE:

- [1]. Socio-Economic Impact of Tourism by Gulab Nabi.
- [2]. Tourism : Impact of globalisation by M.R. Biji
- [3]. Tourism : Development in India by K. H. Iyer
- [4]. Frontiers of new Tourism by M. P. Bezboruah
- [5]. India Tourism Beyond the Millenium by M. P. Bezboruah
- [6]. Tourism in Assam. Trend and potential by Prasanta Bhattacharya.
- [7]. Tourism : Policy and Planning by Ravi Chauhan

Deepjoonalee Bhuyan. "Positioning Of Assam as a Culturally Rich Destination: Potentialities and Prospects." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 09(3), 2020, pp 34-37.