

Community-Based Rural Tourism as a Vehicle for Transformation: A Case Study of North-East India

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Abstract

The community-based tourism is well regarded for it not only benefits the local resident of a region but bring attention to the region's culture and lifestyle to the world. This form of tourism benefits the overall growth of the region through infrastructure development, employment opportunities, business growth and economical increment, especially in rural and less developed areas. In the north-eastern states of India, it becomes prominent to develop community-based tourism in order to bring the rural regions and villages of these states into the mainstream tourism business. The study is the descriptive study of three major north-eastern Indian states i.e. Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya which are famous for their natural habitat and need to be promoted and recognised through community-based rural tourism.

Keywords

Community, Rural, Tourism Destination, Responsible, Sustainable, Eco-friendly

Introduction

Community-based tourism (CBT), sometimes called community-based rural tourism, is a form of tourism which aims to include and benefit local communities, often poor and marginalized inhabitants of the areas. They provide overnight accommodation and earn income as entrepreneurs, service and product providers and employees. The hallmarks of Community-based tourism are indigenous leadership, sustainability, and cultural immersion. A home to more than 200 indigenous tribes of northeast India who trace their ancestry to faraway lands in Mongolia and Southeast Asia, making the region one of the most culturally diverse places on the planet. Preserving these communities in the region's landscape consists of some of the most formidable mountains, forests and river systems, which provide bountiful resources to these tribes who mainly depend on nature for their daily way of life. The tourism sector is one of the economic biggest contributors acting as an agent to the development of many parts of the world. In rural areas of developing countries, tourism development has been eagerly embraced as a panacea for revitalizing the rural economy (Manyara and Jones, 2007; Sitikarn, 2021). This paper focuses on Rural Transformation through community-based tourism in the Northeastern states of India. The report throws light on rural tourism development in the NE region with three specific case studies that show how communities have adopted a sustainable and responsible approach to rural tourism that stimulates economic growth, creates employment and improves the livelihood of communities. The value of using NE India as a reference model for the development and principles of sustainable rural tourism has particular relevance to developing rural tourism in Asia.

Rural Tourism and Community based Tourism – Relationship, Differences & Key points

Rural Tourism

Early researchers like Keller (1990) and Greffe (1992) indicated that a simple definition of rural tourism is inadequate for many purposes. For example, H.Grolleau defined Rural Tourism as a concept that includes all tourism activities in rural areas. But many scholars have opposed it, saying that a trip with a carriage or a picnic or other activity carried out as same day excursion in a remote countryside cannot be considered Rural Tourism.' According to Negrusa (2007), the rural people offer such a form of tourism along with small-scale accommodation units and 'the implication of important components and customs of life'. Such form of tourism showcases rural life, promotes the culture and heritage of rural locations, and at the same time, it benefits the host community economically and socially. Rural Tourism is multifaceted and may entail different forms of tourism.' There are a variety of terms such as farm tourism, agro-tourism, soft tourism, ecotourism etc. are used to describe tourism in rural areas

Community-Based Tourism

Community-based tourism refers to local community movements and initiatives of local village populations (Naira et al., 1993) that meet the needs of tourists. Community-Based Tourist Center Participates in tourism development and planning for creating a sustainable industry (Hall 1996). Community-based tourism is substantially similar to the philosophy of community development and collaborative planning that promotes greater public oversight of local-based processes (IFE 1996). CBT is closely linked to ecotourism, but it offers a more concrete concept by stating the type and degree of participation and involvement for local people and the associated costs (Halstead, 2003: 7; Ayorekire et al., 2022). So, Community Based tourism is more people-centred, community- oriented, and resource-based than ecotourism (Armstrong et al., 2005 quoted in Manis 2008; 48). The idea behind the community-based approach is to create a potential for empowering the community, enhancing their involvement in decision making and ensuring that the will and incentive to participate come from the community itself (Amstrong et al. 2003:2).

The tourism policy of the Ministry of Tourism, India, considers the dynamics of rural and community tourism. It introduces the concept of rural tourism to showcase the rural lifestyle of the Indian landscape to the visitors (Maheshwari, 2020). The Ministry of Tourism started the Rural Tourism scheme in 2002-03 to highlight rural life, art, culture and heritage in rural locations and villages with hub ability in art, craft, handloom, textile and natural products. The purpose was to benefit the local community economically and socially by enabling interaction among stakeholders, including tourists and the local population, for a mutually enriching experience. The promotion of CBT was also aimed toward generating revenue for rural communities through tourist visits, which may stop the exodus from rural to urban areas. While the Government of India aims to promote Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Skill India, Make in India etc., the Ministry of Tourism initiated Swadesh Darshan for the integrated development of theme-based tourist circuits in the country. Under this scheme, the tourism sector is positioned as a significant engine for job creation and economic growth while building synergy with various sectors to enable tourism to realize its potential (Ministry of Tourism Report, 2021).

The Swadesh Darshan scheme objectives are:

- To place tourism as a significant engine of economic growth and job creation;
- build-up circuits having tourist potential in a designed and prioritized manner;
- encourage educational and heritage value of the country to produce livelihoods in the identified regions;
- boost the tourist attractiveness in a sustainable method by mounting world-class road and rail networks in the circuit /destinations;
- pursue community-based development and a pro-poor tourism approach;
- To use latent potential in terms of available infrastructure, national culture and characteristic strong points of each place by including them in thematic tourist circuits.
- Expansion of tourist facilitation services to enhance guest experience and satisfaction.

Eco-Tourism and Community-based Rural Tourism – Relationship, Differences & Key points

Ecotourism is one form of tourism involving traveling responsibly to fragile, pristine and relatively undisturbed natural areas. These natural areas have different methods and procedures to conserve the environment and the indigenous population. According to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserve the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education." WWF's Tourism Position Statement (WWF International, 2001) states that one should have common objectives and goal for conservation and preservation of natural surroundings by adopting eco-tourism. It advocates that there needs to be a vision that tourism development and practice should: (a) need to be a part of a much wider sustainable development strategy; (b) be compatible with effective conservation of natural ecosystems; and (c) involve local people and cultures, ensuring that they have an equitable share in its benefits. In addition, CBT includes some forms of cultural exchange where tourists meet with the local community and get a view of the different sides of their lifestyle (Afenyo-Agbe & Manshah, 2022).

To summarise, the following essentials come into view to be part of CBT:

- To benefit local community, mainly rural or indigenous peoples or people in small towns, contributing to their wellbeing.
- The contentment of the local community and their cultural and environmental assets.
- Using a portion of the profits/resources for community development and maintaining and protecting community cultural or natural heritage assets (e.g. conservation).
- Hosting tourists in the local environment and sharing the profits/benefits equitably.
- Involving communities in tourism planning, decision-making, improvement and even marketing.

CBRT in the North eastern states in India with special reference to Nagaland, Assam and Meghalaya.

North-eastern India includes Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Tourism in these states is based on wildlife, natural beauty, unique flora & fauna, holy shrines, lush green tea gardens, turbulent rivers, vibrant and colourful cultural festivals, and immense corporeal and human diversity. Hence, it is one of the most prospective areas of the country for tourism promotion and development.

The geographic features of the region include plateaus (12%), hills (60%), and plains (28%), together with river systems, contributing appreciably to the fortification of the scenic environment component.

Graphical representation of Northeast India

When the Britishers proclaimed Kaziranga Reservation in 1916 and wildlife in the 1950s, Assam was designed as an attractive destination for tourists interested in observing nature and wildlife. In Kaziranga, security for elephant safari began for tourists in 1938 at the initiative of the forestry department (Forest Department 1969). Besides that, Shillong, the administrative centre of the Assam province during the British period, witnessed the environment of outdoor recreation initiated by the colonial rulers. As a result, at least some people inside and outside the state began visiting Kaziranga, Shillong and the temple of Kamakhya Devi (Guwahati) in the latter part of the 1930s. This can be considered the small beginnings of modern tourism in the NE region.

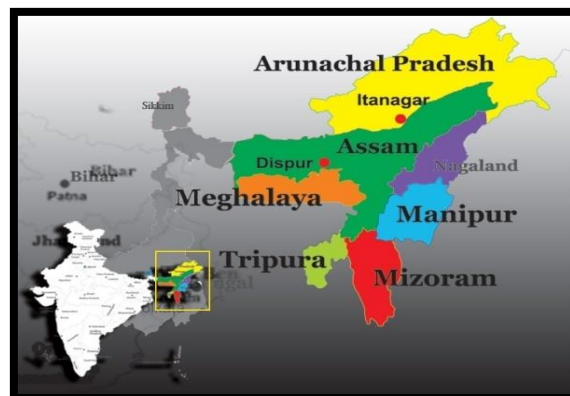


Figure 1: Seven North-eastern Indian states

Source:



Figure 2: Geographical Map of Northeast, India

Source: Ministry of tourism website

[I] CBRT case study of Nagaland

Rural Tourism Sites in Nagaland and its USP	
Place	USP
Mopunchupket, Distt.Mokokchung	Shawl weaving
Avachekha, Distt.Zunheboto	Tribal Culture
Changtongia, Distt.Mokokchung	Tribal Culture
Leshumi, Distt. Phek	Tribal Culture and Adventure
Thetsumi, Distt. Phek	Tribal Culture
Kuki Dulong, Distt.Dimapur	Tribal Culture
Longsa, Distt.Mokokchung	Tribal Culture
Mitikhru, Distt. Phek	Art & Craft(Woodcraft),Handloom
ChungliYimti,DisttTuensang	Historical &Tribal Culture
Village Longjam, Distt.Zunheboto	Craft /Handloom(Mekhala and Shawls)/Culture
Village Shena Old, Distt Zunheboto	Adventure (trekking and bird-watching)
Village Longidang, Distt Wokha	Wood craft and carving

Source: Ministry of Tourism, India

Nagaland: The land of festivals

Nagaland State was formally inaugurated on December 1, 1963, as the 16th State of the Indian Union. It borders Assam in the west, Myanmar (Burma) in the East, Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam and Manipur. Nagaland consists of seven administrative districts inhabited by 16 main tribes and other sub-tribes. Each tribe is different in terms of customs, language and dress. It is a land of folklore transmitted from generation to generation through folktales and word of mouth storytelling. The culture of the state is famous for its popular songs which praise the ancestors, brave stories of local warriors and traditional heroes; poetic love songs that immortalize ancient tragic stories of love; Songs of the Gospel that touch your soul (if you have a religious mental inclination) or modern melodies exquisitely represented to make your feet touch.

Each of the 16 unique tribes and sub-tribes that inhabit this exotic mountainous state can be easily distinguished by its colorful and intricately designed costumes, jewels and beads. The current generation of Nagas has ventured into fashion design in a big way, reproducing fabrics that represent traditional motifs combined with modern appeal. It is a beautiful mixture of the past with the present, a paradise for those who are dedicated to fashion design. This is a trendy affluent station in the east. Nagaland is blessed with a healthy climate throughout the year, and one can visit it at any time. For a calm and peaceful getaway, away from the hustle and bustle of city life, it offers the right atmosphere, as life here is relaxed and slow, providing a life free of tension. For the adventurous and courageous, Nagaland is an ideal place for hiking, rock climbing, and

camping in the jungle. It offers unlimited exploration possibilities in its lush and green subtropical, tropical forests that are also a treasure of a plethora of medicinal plants. Nagas, by nature, are lovers of fun and fun, and here, life is a long festival. The Nagas, with their joie de vivre, dance and songs, are an integral part of all their festivities. Most of these dances are performed with a robust rhythm.

CBRT in Dzuleke, Nagaland

Dzuleke is an idyllic village of the Angami tribe of Nagaland and is located near the capital, Kohima. Travelers who visit Kohima often take a day trip to nearby towns to explore the beautiful countryside and also to observe the traditional culture and lifestyle of the Angami natives. Khonoma and Dzuleke became well known in the outside world as they were the first people to ban hunting to protect their community forests. With the influx of visitors, the local community soon became involved in ecotourism. The initiative in the village of Dzuleke began with the objective of conserving the village's natural resources and achieving sustainable forest management through ecotourism. The villagers established Dzuleke Ecotourism Board (DETB). The Northeast Initiatives Development Agency (NEIDA) has collaborated on the project with the support of the Sir Ratan Tata Trust. NEIDA is a non-profit society that provides monitoring and training to such rural projects. The NGO has helped villagers to contribute to tourism by opening family homes for travellers and giving equal opportunities to all households to offer hospitality. They organize family homes and support the local population to promote tourism in Dzuleke. In addition to the rural stay and cultural experience, Dzuleke now has much more to offer. Visitors can enjoy guided tours of the village, short walks in the community's forests to observe birds and butterflies, camping and other adventure activities. In addition, greener Pastures organizes stays in rural homestays for its guests in Dzuleke in its itinerary of the Naga tribes.

Hornbill Festival, a driving force for community development in Nagaland.

The Government of Nagaland organizes the celebration of the Hornbill Festival, which is celebrated in the first week of December every year, to encourage interaction between tribes and promote the cultural richness of Nagaland. Hence, it is popularly known as the "festival of festivals". The name of the respected and revered Hornbill bird and celebrated in the beautiful hills of Kohima, the festival is a time of joyous and colourful celebration, where all the tribes of Nagaland participate. During this time, there are tribal representations and ceremonies, an exhibition of ethnic handicrafts, sports, food fairs and games. Some highlights are Traditional Naga Morungs, arts and crafts exhibition, food stalls, flower shows, herbal medicine exhibition, fashion shows, beauty pageants, traditional archery and wrestling, local games, music concerts, elaborate dances and popular songs. On this tour, you will get a detailed view of the people and culture of Nagaland. You will have the opportunity to meet the tribes, interact with them, visit their villages and be impressed by their charming hospitality and kindness. The visitors enjoy the festival by participating in the drinking, the food, the singing, the dancing and the merrymaking. In this way, the preservation of cultural heritage and community conservation gets successfully established. In addition, as a new facet of the local economy, CBT helped stakeholders earn money for the community and meet many of the requirements of the villagers and small-town inhabitants. The extra money is spent on maintaining the areas' parks, sites and cultural halls. To encourage rural CBT,

the Nagaland government is also working on awareness programs in the interior areas to implement centrally sponsored schemes such as 'Swadesh Darshan' and 'PRASAD (National Mission in Rejuvenation of Pilgrimages and Spiritual Enhancement Campaign)' to tap the great potential in rural Community-based tourism.

[II] CBRT case study in Assam

Rural Tourism Sites in Assam and USP	
Place	USP
Durgapur, Distt. Golaghat	Bamboo Craft and Cuisine
Dehing-PatakaiKshetra, Distt. Tinsukia	Culture and Ecotourism
Sualkuchi in Distt. Kamrup	Patta and Moga Silk weaving
Village Asharikandi, Distt. Dhubri	Terracota Craft

Source: Ministry of Tourism, India

Assam: A Tourist hub for North East India

Assam is the gateway to the northeastern Indian states. Adjacent geographic states have interrelated cultural relationships also. An attractive feature of Assam's forests is the varied wildlife landscape. Some species are exclusive to the state. Assam is the home of the unicorn rhino, which is its unique selling point in addition to fauna. Wildlife safaris, hiking, trekking and nature walks in the dense forests attract visitors to Assam. The famous Shakti-peeth, Kamakhya temple at the top of Nilachal Hills in Guwahati attracts spiritual tourists. It has catapulted Assam into one of the leading spiritual tourist destinations in the country. In June, the annual Fourth Ambubasi Mela in the Kamakhya Temple is known as Mahakumbh in the East, where lakhs of people and sadhus gather. Hajo is the next centre where people from three religions - Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism - converge for a common quest. Assam is a unique place on earth for cultural and ethnic diversity. The state is the home of various ethnic groups, each of which has its cultural heritage. Each of these tribes has unique features in its socio-cultural life, including customs, religious beliefs, language, culture, dress, lifestyle, festivals, eating habits, songs and dances that differ. The state of Assam has an extensive river network. The Brahmaputra is the backdrop of social-cultural life in Assam. Assam has tremendous opportunities to develop river tourism and water activities. Colourful canals, boating, luxury cruisers, motor boats, dolphin tours, underwater world, water sports and lighters, parasailing, river rafting, water fun and more. Walking in Assam could be a great way to spend your vacation. The International Standard of Luxury Cruises can be an excellent engine for pumping more domestic and international tourism to Assam.

Majuli Island, Assam and CBRT

Majuli, a river-made island, is the largest of its kind in the world (Shrivastav 2010) and the heart of Neo-Vaishnavite institutions/monasteries of Assam, popularly known as Satras. The Majuli is also its only inhabited and freshwater island (Nath 2009). Mohammad Cazim, the biographer of Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707), stated that it was about 50 Kosh in length, which is equivalent to 100 miles (Asiatic Research 2009). Majuli has a unique identity of have exotic land habitat and flora & fauna.

Demographically, the island's society presents a diversified population comprising people of various castes inhabiting Assam. Majuli, as a potential tourist spot, possesses the features of being launched as a community-based tourism activity zone. The reason for such a position is apparent and lies in the kinds of tourism products delivered by the island community to visitors worldwide. The primary outcome of tourism is not something produced by the industry. There is no doubt in the mind of the community at large that Majuli holds a great prospect as a potential tourist destination as well as bring benefits to individuals and households in the community, community benefits where there is a distribution of use to all homes in the community. It also provides additional income for farmers and, in some cases, the fisherman in the area.

CBRT in Manas, Assam

Manas National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most prominent biodiversity hotspots of Northeast India, boasting of a wide range of flora and fauna. But during the 1990s, the national park witnessed a dark period – where poaching and logging almost wiped out the ecology of the National Park. However, the last decade has seen a lot of improvement, fuelled by pro-conservation decisions taken by the government and wildlife groups who worked with local communities. In 2005, a non-profit organization called Manas Ever Welfare Society (MEWS) was established. The NGO was formed by volunteering enthusiastic youths from the villages around the national park to bring an end to the rampant poaching that was going on and spread awareness in the local communities about wildlife. Since then, MEWS has brought about tremendous change in the people's mindsets, and many poachers have surrendered, only to become conversationalists and guides. MEWS has developed three accommodation facilities in the national park to cater to travellers. Run by local youths, with the support of Greener Pastures and other like-minded organizations, the influx of visitors has boosted the morale of the entire community and generated much-needed local income. This initiative has successfully established a new sense of love for wildlife and conservation. Small-scale tourism as a new source of the economy has helped solve many of the village problems, and the extra money is even spent on monitoring wildlife and erecting watchtowers to detect illegal incursions. An NGO, Balipara Foundation and Assam Tourism are in talks to encourage community-based tourism. Since 2007, Balipara Foundation has initiated experiments in ecological protection and restoration of the Eastern Himalayan Region through Natureomics. Their journey is to execute the vision of Conserving & Preserving the Natural Heritage of the Eastern Himalayas through a series of experiments. These experiments have led to working prototypes and innovative project models for conservation and botany through social mobility and the uplifting local community.

[III] CBRT case study in Meghalaya

Rural Tourism Sites in Meghalaya and USP	
Place	USP
Village lalong, Distt. Jaintia Hills	Adventure
Village Sasatgre, Distt. West Garo Hills	Bamboo Craft
Village Mawlynnong, Distt East KhasiHills	Eco-tourism

Source: Ministry of Tourism, India

Meghalaya: Abode of Clouds

Meghalaya, formerly part of Assam, became a fully-fledged state on January 21, 1972. In Meghalaya are the hills of Khasi, Garo and Jaintia. The state has a 496 km long international border with Bangladesh in the south and west. Assam bounds it to the north and east. The eastern part is determined by Karbi Hills, a continuation of the Meghalayan Plateau. In the north and west lies a vast canyon drained by the Brahmaputra River; in the south, the Surma River and its tributaries lie. Meghalaya has 11 districts, namely West Jaintia Hills, East Jaintia Hills, East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Southwest Khasi Hills, Ri-Bhoi, North Garo Hills, Eastern Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, West Garo Hills and Southwest Garo Hills.

CBRT in Mawlynnong, Meghalaya

Mawlynnong, a village inhabited by the Khasi people, is situated amidst pristine forested foothills overlooking the plains of Bangladesh. The town is regarded by many as the cleanest village in Asia. But keeping the village clean requires hard work and motivation. Dustbins made out of bamboo are found everywhere in the village, and the villagers make it a point not to litter elsewhere. The organic waste collected is used as manure. The use of plastic has also been banned. The village, which has a literacy rate of a hundred per cent, is now spreading the message of conservation and protection of the forests to other nearby towns. Trees are regularly planted to ensure that the virgin forest remains replenished. To further motivate themselves, the village has opened its door to responsible tourism in the past few years. A few homestays have been started by the families, along with a community guesthouse. Visitors to the village learn about the Khasi culture, indulge in their simple ethnic cuisine, explore forest trails and nearby villages, swim in numerous waterfalls and marvel at the living rootbridges. Tourism is bringing in livelihood opportunities for the people of this village. The income generated directly benefits the local economy and helps in forestation. But more than the money, the balanced small-scale tourism has acted as a source of inspiration for the villagers encouraging them to conserve further and keep the environment clean.

Challenges and Discussions

As the primary stakeholder in tourism development, local communities are involved in community-based tourism development. Due to a lack of awareness on the part of communities, this concept of bottom-up planning is typically applied in a top-down manner most of the time. There hasn't been much research into how local communities view their roles in tourism development, and often, external forces like non-governmental organisations' encouragement of the local communities catalyse community participation from the planning to execution levels. The benefits of tourism, or community-based rural tourism (CBRT in this context), are described in a variety of ways, including as a tool for physical and economic development, a way to promote the growth of social and human capital, and a way to preserve the environment (Mensah & Afenyo, 2022). The development of tourism has been enthusiastically embraced in rural areas, particularly in developing nations, as a panacea for revitalising the rural economy. As a result, many government agencies, particularly those involved in tourism, have invested heavily to support more sustainable forms of community-based tourism in rural areas. Normal circumstances, where CBRT is run outside of disaster-prone areas or with less thought given to reducing disaster risk when operating a tourism business, could lead to CBRT flourishing in rural areas, which would then be

able to secure local job creation, stable income generation, reducing youth and worker outmigration, protecting natural resources and local culture, etc. Regarding CBRT programmes that are running in disaster-prone areas, their operators might not share the same views because they must deal with various problems and difficulties, including in this case difficulties in generating enough income to support their operation and also difficulties in lowering disaster risk and potential losses to their business.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Concerning the local household communities in our study-specific areas, it has been noticed that they are pretty concerned about the impact of both geographical and economic aspects. The local community do believe in the role they have to play in promoting tourism and tourism-based activities in the region. The local community's attitude towards a sustainable tourism industry is quite strong. This mind set positively impacts promoting tourism activities in the Northeast region. Local communities are willing to participate in different tourism management practices which could directly or indirectly affect their day-to-day lifestyle. Adequate participation of local communities in such activities could lead to more involved and constructive tourism practices in the region. However, they perceive that lack of funds, inadequate representation in higher authority and less experience & knowledge keeps them away from such participative activities at some destinations. With this view, some local NGOs are taking initiatives to keep them aware and involved in certain levels of decision-making processes. The cost versus benefit aspect of tourism and tourism-based activities is another critical element to be taken care of. The opinion of the local household respondents shows that apart from their support and willingness to develop tourism and tourism-based activities in the region are pretty concerned about the possible impact of such activities. However, local household communities also perceive that tourism-based activities could generate sustainable revenue for the local community. The local household respondents' opinion shows that tourism and tourism-based activities could play a more positive role shortly. Suppose the right initiatives and promotional aspects were taken care of and implemented. In that case, there is a fair chance that this industry could help the destination to get a tag of 'tourism destination'. Lastly, the benefits from CBT in the North-Eastern region cannot be stressed enough: namely, Socio-economic development, Employment generation, community-owned and managed enterprises, private sector enterprises with community benefits, Job retention, Alternative business opportunities, Poverty alleviation, Empowerment of localities, Entrepreneurial scope, sale of Arts and crafts and Cultural and Heritage preservation.

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