

Tourism: A Trade Link Between India's North East and South East Asia

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has become a competitive industry in North East region of India in the recent past. The region has a tremendous locational advantage, though popular perception sometime is exactly to the contrary. Almost 98 percent of the borders of the North-East are International- a veritable gateway to the South-East Asia and the world. China to the north, Bangladesh in the South-west, Myanmar in the East and Bhutan in the North-West share borders with the North-East region. This is a grand opportunity since the locational proximity can be leveraged to promote tourism in the entire region. Government of India must therefore, identify tourism as a priority sector raising allocation by five fold in its developmental plans. Present paper focuses on the measures that can be a tourism and trade linkage between India's North East and South East Asia.

KEY WORDS: *North East Region, Trade, Tourism, Culture, Traditions*

Introduction:

North East India is surrounded by hills and mountains on three sides. It is only toward the west that the region is bordered by plains. But at the time of attainment of Independence in 1947, the country was so partitioned that the eastern part of the then Bengal was constituted into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and this almost isolated the north eastern part of India from the rest of the country, except for a narrow corridor that lies between two foreign countries (Bhutan and Bangladesh), whereas the main part of the region is surrounded by four foreign countries (viz. China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Bhutan). The location of the region and its richness in biodiversity has become a place of attraction for Tourism Industry. The region at large is building important infrastructure so as to develop tourism industry in recent years. Encompassing hills, mountains, plains and plateaus and being situated between South Asia and South East Asia, the region has many culture groups and communities with varied cultural background and varieties of exotic flora and fauna which can easily attract tourists from the world over. In fact, North East has all the physical and human elements that cater to the requirement of the tourists. With hills, mountains, vales, dales, lush green forests and numerous rivers including the Brahmaputra, one of the largest rivers in the world, the region has many spots of scenic beauty. Its virgin forests contain many species of rare and exotic plants including orchids. The region also has rare and exotic birds and animals including one-horned Asian rhinoceros, one of the four varieties of the apes living in the world today, viz. Hoolock gibbon, besides tiger, deer, antelope, bison and many kinds of rare birds. The region also has very ancient places of pilgrimage and archaeological and historical monuments and remains. As the region is inhabited by peoples of different racial and ethno-linguistic background, it supports human groups, each with its own colourful traditional art, culture, handicraft, fair and festivals. The rugged and high hills and mountains and large rivers provide opportunity for adventure sports, like mountaineering, trekking, rafting, and other games and pastime like boating,

rowing, pleasure cruising etc. The tranquil atmosphere and salubrious climate is an ideal scope that can be used as health resorts.

Potentialities:

Tourism has emerged as one of the prospective sectors of industry in the Northeast in the recent times. Expert foresees a more explosive growth in this sector in the coming decades. In order to further accelerate the development of the sector, the thrust area pursued during the Ninth Five Year Plan were- (a) development of infrastructure; (b) product development; (c) development of trekking, winter sports, wildlife and beach resorts, (d) exploring new source markets in regions and countries having cultural affinity; (e) environmental protection and cultural preservation of natural heritage projects; (f) launching of national image building and marketing plan in key markets; (g) providing inexpensive accommodation in different tourist centers; (h) improving service efficiency in public sector corporations; (i) streamlining of facilitation procedures at airports; (j) human resource development; (k) monitoring and evaluation; (l) strengthening of organization; (m) creating awareness and public participation and; (n) facilitating private sector participation in development of infrastructure etc.

The North Eastern part of India is almost another world. It is a place of magical beauty and bewildering diversity. A land nestled in myths and mysteries, lore and legends and in many tender dreams. A land where the summer rains drench the hills meeting the misty plains, where exotic wildlife haunts the jungles, where flow rivers like the Brahmaputra, the Barak and the Imphal and where the trains whistle into dark tunnels only to open out to breathtaking landscapes.

With more than a hundred and fifty tribes speaking as many languages, this region is a melting pot of variegated cultural mosaic of people and races, an ethnic tapestry of many hues and shades. The folk culture is still vital in this region. The primitive culture of at least the neolithic age now co-exists with the modern and post-modern lifestyle. Well integrated with life and nature, the folk artworks have a common element of tune and tone. Indeed it's a virtual paradise for travelers, searching for continuous joy in Pilgrimage, Adventure, Culture, Nature, Heritage, Wildlife, Golf and Polo and many more. All these make a rich panorama. It's a land in the twilight of imagination and reality. It's a tourists' delight.

Though Northeastern region possesses rich history, culture and scenic beauty comparable to any other developed tourist spot of the country, very few foreign tourists of the world are exploring this region.

Inflow of Tourists in the region

Despite the early start in the tourism industry and traditional warm and hospitable people living in North Eastern India, it is found that number of domestic tourist slightly declined in 2003 as compared to 2002. However, there is a marginal increase in foreign tourists during the same period. In the keynote speech of Shri P.R. Kyndiah, Hon'ble Minister for Development of North Eastern Region & Tribal affair addressed at International Conference on Eco & Rural Tourism August 25-26, 2004, New Delhi, he pointed out that *"there is a wrong perception that entire North Eastern Region is beset with multiple insurgencies. The fact is militancy does exist in certain pockets only but large area in the region is not at all affected by the cult of terrorism and insurgency. We are determined to enlarge the peace area and constrict the area of disturbance. I would appeal to the people at large and media in particular to provide this vital information to the people at large"*.

Tourism industry has suffered a backlog development in the region due to various factors. However; the general scenario of the inflow of tourists in the region can be highlighted from the table 1.

Table 1 : Number of Tourist Spots and Tourists in North East India

States	Tourist		
	Indian	Foreigners	Total
Arunachal Pradesh, 2005-06	3025	292	3317
Assam, 2006-07	3479870	13657	3493527
Manipur, 2006-07	120572	263	120835
Meghalaya, 2005	375911	5099	381010
Mizoram, 2007-08	44226	735	46312
Nagaland, 2006	15030	1002	16032
Sikkim, 2007	215843	9001	224844
Tripura, 2006-07	229621	3177	232798

Source: Deptt of Tourism, Govt of India, Tourism Statistics

From the table given below it can be seen that different states of the region experienced tourists flow in a variant degree during 2005 to 2008. Assam received the highest tourists with a total of more than thirty-four lakhs and the least is Arunachal Pradesh with only less than four thousand. This probably maybe attributed to the location of the area since Assam is located at the doorstep of the region whereas Arunachal is situated far north of the region and transportation system is also not so developed to transport tourists . Therefore, these factors hamper tourists to travel the region. Nevertheless, the region's potentialities for tourism still hold a very important position for the nation's development and pride therefore the government of India has announced important package for tourism development.

New Tourism Products Development in the Region:

Tourism development started after the relaxation of RAP/ ILP/PAP in the late 90's. In the beginning domestic tourists from West Bengal and nearby states visited the North east especially for religious purpose (Kamakhya Temple, the famous pilgrimage centre of the region). Apart from Guwahati domestic tourists visit Shillong (Hill station) and Kaziranga National Park (which is famous for its one-horned Rhino). Gradually and steadily the foreign tourists numbers also increased in Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura which evoked the demand for new tourism products to emerge.

The proposal to set up a North-East Tourism Development Fund and review of the existing projects and plans relating to tourism and culture will be the focus of the meeting of Tourism and Culture Ministers of all the North-Eastern States, which was held in Guwahati on July 3-4 2006. The meeting, convened at the initiative of Union Tourism and Culture Minister Ambika Soni, discussed the status of projects sanctioned by the Centre for the North-Eastern States, issues concerning project formulation and implementation and encouragement to the private sector and local entrepreneurs for development of tourism infrastructure. Some specific issues on the agenda for discussion are as follows:

- *Programme for 2550th Anniversary of Mahaparinivana of Lord Buddha; issues relating to Restricted Area Permit/Protected Area Permit/Inner Line Permit regions in North East States; review of the working of North-East Shilpagram at Dimapur; and progress of the multipurpose cultural complex scheme of the Culture Ministry.*
- *Status of the cultural festival of the North-East and initiatives in the library sector, particularly infrastructure development and library strengthening programme of the Raja Rammohan Roy Library Foundation.*

On April 1st 2007, the government approved a package of fiscal incentives and other concessions for the region under *North East Industrial and Investment Promotion Policy (NEIIPP) 2007* covering all states of the region. The incentives are applicable to the following service sectors/activities/ industries:

- Hotels (not below two star category), adventure and leisure sports including ropeways.
- Medical and health services in the nature of nursing home with a minimum capacity of 25 beds and old age homes
- Vocational training institute catering to the training needs in the following area: Hotel Management, Catering, Food Crafts and Entrepreneur Development etc.

The Guwahati summit which was jointly organised by the Ministry of the Development of the North Eastern Region and the Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) in September 2008 attended by delegates from neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore commemorates the region's importance in regional development. In the summit Vice-President M. Hamid Ansari said that India's north eastern region should become the hub of the country's growing trade and business with Southeast Asia. Several union ministers, chief ministers and ministers of the north-eastern states, investors and industrialists from India as well as neighbouring countries have taken part in the summit.

The summit generated high degree of investment interest in the corporate world. In all 247 Expressions of Interests (EOI) from 64 companies were received, almost double the number of EOIs generated in the last session in New Delhi. Of the 247 EOIs, the highest number of 64 is from Assam, followed by 45 from Arunachal Pradesh, 34 from Meghalaya, 19 from Tripura, 17 from Manipur, 26 from Mizoram, 27 from Sikkim and 15 from Nagaland. The agro and food processing sector received 65 EOIs, tourism over 50, infrastructure over 70, information technology over 30 and manufacturing got 12.

An MOU was signed between the Indian Chamber of Commerce and its Bangladeshi counterpart to focus on promotion of trade in the northeast region.

"There should be air and bus service between Guwahati and Dhaka," said Farooq Sobhan, former Bangladesh high commissioner to India. Sobhan, also former foreign secretary of Bangladesh, told the concluding session of the summit that the customs procedures between the two countries should be simplified to promote trade and business.

Till recently there was no integrated road map for development of the region but with the release of the Vision 2020 document in July by the Prime Minister (Manmohan Singh) this lacuna has been corrected, Mani Shankar Aiyar, who is also the chairman of the North Eastern Council (NEC), told the gathering.

"To attain the objectives of the Vision 2020, the government investment in the northeast will have to rise to Rs.14 trillion from the current Rs. One trillion, while the private sector needs to take greater interest in the region. Now only 0.5 percent of the capital formation of the private sector is coming to this region," he said.

Aiyar hoped that the summit would encourage foreign companies to make investments in the region. Participation from neighbours like Thailand, Myanmar and Bangladesh means exploration of serious business opportunities has begun, he said. Calling for an end to the isolation of the northeast, Ansari said: "The government is committed to converting diplomatic initiatives into commercial opportunities for the overall development of the region."

Recently the Ministry of Finance, in the Budget Proposal 2008-09 has proposed to grant a five year holiday from income tax to two or three or four star hotels that are established in a specified districts which was declared 'World Heritage Site' by the UNESCO. The hotels should be constructed and start functioning during the period April 1st 2008 to March 31st 2013.

In February 2009, the three day **ASEAN North East India Business and Trade Opportunities Summit** the first of its kind in Vietnam came as part of India's "Look East policy", opened on February 12 was organized by the Ministry of DoNER in association with the Indian Chamber of Commerce, Indian Diplomatic Mission in Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industries bringing together Government and business delegates from South-east Asia and eight North Eastern Indian States to build closer ties with Vietnam and Southeast. It was an eye opener to all the delegates attending the summit when

the Secretary of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) Jarnail Singh, said "Tourism is the most effective way to increase the still negligible trade between India's north eastern region and Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Although these countries are so near, yet they are so far." He further said that the focus of the conference was on tourism as the key to increasing Indian-Vietnamese trade.

Thirteen tourism companies attending the conference showed interest in future cooperation. Rajeev Singh, Secretary General of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, said a key challenge to tourism and trade is the North Eastern Region's lacking of "proper road connectivity" to Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia.

However, "with good roads he added transportation, time and cost, will be reduced by half and trade will go on." Dhananjay Kumar, Chairman of the Indian Business Chamber in Vietnam, said trade with ASEAN accounts for just 9 percent of India's overall trade, and with Vietnam, a mere 0.8 percent. A lot of opportunities are thus to be seized, he added. "The Northeast region of India has a lot of commonalities with development of the Mekong sub-region. Given the proximity and land connectivity to Southeast Asia, the region can be a connecting link between India and ASEAN countries," said Dr.Govinda Rao, Director of the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy and member of the Economic Advisory Council to the Indian Prime Minister. The north eastern region, a reservoir of rich natural resources and a beautiful amalgamation of different peoples and cultures, are ripe investment destinations with a lot in common with the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

The region had low market development, very little manufacturing activity, and low per capita income at 62 per cent of the national average. However, the region has huge potentials in hydro-power, oil and gas, coal, limestone and forestry industries, not to mention stunning natural beauty and cultural diversity that makes it a tourism paradise. The region is home to many different ethnic minorities, unique traditions and festivals.

However, the region needed at least US\$30 billion to develop various industries including its agro-processing, handloom and handicraft, bamboo, cement, oil, hydropower, information technology and tourism. Right now, tourism is the third largest foreign exchange earner for India. Indian officials are hoping to highlight northeast India's temperate climate, majestic landscapes, pilgrimage sites, handicrafts, wildlife and high cultural diversity as ideal eco-tourism and adventure destinations.

"We can co-operate to create a package tour that includes Vietnam and the Northeast of India for U.S, European and Japanese visitors," suggested Conrad Sangma, Tourism Minister for the Government of Meghalaya, one of the eight states in the region.

K.C Nihoshe, Parliamentary Secretary for the Government of Nagaland, said: "Vietnamese Government and the business community should consider the Northeast of India as a true business opportunity. Local governments have pledged preferential policies for foreign investors" India's north eastern region shares almost 98 per cent of its borders with China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. This makes the region a prospective hub for regional and international trade. The region occupies 7.8 per cent of the country's land mass but only 3.73 per cent of its population.

Prospects of Trade through Tourism in North East Region:

The proposed East West corridor project will improve the connectivity and reopening of Guwahati International Airport will definitely facilitate the tourists from all over the neighbouring region. It will be the region's endeavor to establish the much needed corridor between North East as a bridge to South East Asia for economic operation and to make North East a hub for trade and commerce as well as a popular tourist destination. The breathtaking beauty of North East has prompted many comparisons like the "Scotland of the East" and "Switzerland of India". The entire tourism industry and its infrastructure is an area of unlimited business potential, contributing to employment generation and increased revenue earnings. This is an area where immediate benefits can be reaped.

The UPA Government is committed to take proactive measures to speed up the development of N.E. Region in order to bring it at par with the rest of the country. The setting up of an independent Ministry to focus on the growth of the region, the creation of a special agenda for the North-East which is monitored by the Prime Minister's Office, instituting a non-lapsable pool of resources (NLCPR) to speed up developmental projects and the extension of fiscal and financial incentives to support industrial investment, are some of the unique measures that have been taken by the Central Government to help shape a new future for one of India's most beautiful frontier region. The Ministry has also taken a new initiative to encourage externally aided projects for North Eastern Region to accelerate development in key sectors like roads network energy, water resource management, urban development, infrastructure for external trade and tourism.

The new paradigm has emerged after many years of concerted action initiated by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru the first Prime Minister of the Country. A very strong foundation for growth has been put in place. Infrastructure development, strengthening of the education and healthcare facilities, creation of employment opportunities, setting up a large network for IT operations and new climate of industrial investment is rapidly transforming the landscape of the region. And with this new phase of development, a host of exciting opportunities have emerged.

For the development of tourism in this region, the promotion of eco-tourism is the most viable option - the resources for which are in abundance in the Northeast. However the facilities, technicalities and professionalism involved in creating eco-tourism products have to be developed keeping in mind specific needs and requirements. Communities should be given significant inputs about the pros and cons of tourism so as to avoid its negative impact. It is not enough to have just eco-tourism policy and guidelines. The means to implement these policies must be made available and a conducive atmosphere should be created to make it workable.

The potential of tourism sector in employment generation both direct and indirect is phenomenal and must engage the attention of all policy makers and opinion makers. Since development of infrastructure facilities is a pre requisite for development of tourism, I would request all the state governments of the region to plan the development of various infrastructures viz., roads, power, tourist complexes, hotels etc. at particular tourist centers. I assure all possible help from my Ministry in such endeavours.

Recommendations may also take note of and deliberate: (i) Tourists from East Asian and South East Asian countries should be given focus while developing International tourist traffic to the region. (ii) The training of local youth in tourism vocations has to be given high priority to ensure that the benefits of tourism development are shared by the people of the region. (iii) Effective marketing and promotional efforts have to be undertaken to attract domestic and international tourists to the region. (iv) Efforts should be made for attracting private investment in improving tourism infrastructure in the region particularly by providing the requisite facilities and incentives.

Conclusion

The awareness at present is gaining momentum in the region. It demands a sustained promotional campaign through print television or internet. Travel guide and Travel writers publishers should be networked and invited to write about destinations in North East. As mentioned earlier the Central government has taken a positive pathway in developing the region for tourism which in turn will link other countries of the world to have trade ties with India through the region.

Thus the sinequonon for tourism development in north east region is the political will and commitment on the part of leadership at the central, state and district level and association of the local people with a view of assuring them that tourism will in no way harm their interests. Far from it, tourism can be an instrument for improving the quality of life by

protecting environment and providing gainful employment to the disadvantaged.

So, the need of the hour is nothing but commitment towards the people, towards the country and in turn to the whole of the environment. Expectantly, this could be based on the agenda on tourism if it is inclined to show the much needed will to boost an industry that has come to be recognized for its key role in socio-economic development.

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