



Opportunities and Long-Term Viability of Ethno-Tourism in Assam with a focus on Dibrugarh District

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ABSTRACT

Assam, an important state in Northeast India, acts as the entry point to the entire region. Its captivating natural landscapes, including green hills, dense forests, flowing rivers, rich biodiversity, and the good nature of its people, attract both tourists and researchers. The state is dotted with several popular tourist destinations, including national parks, wildlife and bird sanctuaries, archaeological sites, and places of immense cultural significance. Assam holds vast potential for the growth of eco-tourism, adventure tourism, tea tourism, and ethno-cultural tourism. This research particularly revels in examining the prospects and sustainability of ethno-tourism in the eastern part of Assam, especially in Dibrugarh district. Assamese society is historically known for its multi-ethnic composition, shaped by the integration of various cultural groups over time. Dibrugarh district is a hub of rich ethnocultural diversity, inhabited by several indigenous communities who have preserved their unique customs and traditions. Ethnic groups such as the Morans, Matakas, Singphoes, Hajongs, Deories, Tai Ahoms, Tai Khamtis, Tai Phakeys, Missings, Sonowal Kacharies, among others, contribute to the region's cultural vibrancy. While many of these groups share popular traditions, some continue to maintain their distinct recognitions. The purpose of this study is to



showcase the traditional practices, cultural expressions, and religious beliefs of the Matak and Moran communities residing in the Dibrugarh district.

Introduction:

The term "tourism" primarily refers to the act of traveling and all associated activities. In the present-day context, it covers the interactions, experiences, and outcomes arising from journeys and temporary stays by non-residents. As a significant aspect of modern society, tourism is closely linked with multiple sectors, particularly the economy, as it depends on the temporary movement of people across regions, states, or nations. Recognizing tourism's contribution to economic growth, countries like India have made strategic efforts to promote it across various areas. Notably, in 1992, the Assam Government accorded tourism the status of an industry to encourage private investment, particularly for building vital infrastructure.

Assam, a prominent state in Northeast India, is considered the entry point to the region. Its breathtaking landscapes, lush hills, dense forests, flowing rivers, abundant wildlife, and the warm nature of its people make it an ideal destination for nature lovers and researchers. The state offers a variety of tourist attractions, including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, bird reserves, historical sites, and places rich in cultural heritage.

There is immense potential for the growth of eco-tourism, adventure tourism, tea tourism, and ethno-cultural tourism in Assam. This research focuses on assessing the prospects and sustainability of ethno-tourism, especially in the Dibrugarh district of eastern Assam. Historically, Assamese culture is known for its multicultural identity, shaped by the convergence of diverse ethnic communities over the centuries.

Dibrugarh district is particularly rich in cultural diversity, inhabited by various indigenous groups who maintain distinct customs and traditions. Among these communities are the Morans, Matak, Singphoes, Hajongs, Deories, Tai Ahoms, Tai Khamtis, Tai Phakeys, Missings, and Sonowal Kacharies. While many groups have blended their traditions over time, several still preserve their unique cultural identities.

The purpose of this study is to document and showcase the cultural practices, traditions, and religious beliefs of the Matak and Moran communities residing in Dibrugarh. Assam, known for its incredible diversity, is home to people of different ethnic origins, languages, and faiths. This diversity forms the



foundation of Assam's composite culture, which truly reflects the harmonious coexistence of multiple communities.

The rich cultural fabric of Assam could be better understood through a detailed exploration of the history and civilizations of its various ethnic groups. The Matak community is one such prominent group that has developed distinct cultural practices and social norms, largely impacted by Vaishnavite reform movements. They have also played an important role in shaping the political landscape of Northeast India. There are differing opinions regarding the correct spelling and meaning of "Matak." One belief is that it comes from "mat," meaning principle, and "ek," meaning one, symbolizing "people of one principle." However, according to historical records from the Tai Ahom and Assamese chronicles, the Ahoms named indigenous groups based on their physical traits and behaviors. When Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom dynasty, arrived, he encountered fierce resistance from a section of the Moran tribe. It is believed that the term "Matak" was given by the Ahoms, meaning "powerful man," derived from "ma" (powerful) and "tak" (weighed or tested).

The Moran community is primarily found in Assam's Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts. There are various discussions of the term "Moran." One legend suggests that it originated from a woman in the community who possessed mystical healing powers and authority that could bring the dead back to life, where "Mor" means death and "An" means to call or summon.

Objectives of the Study:

The primary aim of this research is to identify the prospects and sustainability of ethno-tourism in eastern Assam, focusing particularly on the Dibrugarh district. Along with promoting tourist attractions, this approach is expected to aid in preserving local cultural heritage and attracting care tourists who value and respect the environment and Indigenous communities. The key objectives of this study are:

1. To document and understand the traditions, customs, and cultural practices of the ethnic groups of Assam, with special emphasis on the Matak and Moran communities.
- 2) To throw light on the present tourist destinations, existing tourism infrastructure, and new tourist areas.
- 3) To show the economic benefits evaluation and employment opportunities, as well as the socio-cultural and environmental benefits.

**Methodology:**

For this study, the Dibrugarh district of Assam has been chosen as the primary area of the research. The researchers selected respondents randomly for this project. Notably, two prominent ethnic groups — the Matakas and the Morans — have been specifically chosen for detailed study. Additionally, certain well-known tourist locations were selected to gather relevant data, ensuring the smooth progress of the research using both qualitative and quantitative studies. The qualitative study involved observation and case study methods, while the quantitative approach included conducting interviews and surveys with the selected respondents. Data for this research were gathered from both primary and secondary sources.

Different Satras in Upper Assam

Dihing Satra: During the Moamoria uprising, this satra received royal patronage from kings like Rajeswar Singha, Lakhi Singha, and Gaurinath Singha. It is situated on the banks of the river Dehing under Larua Mouza.

Dinjoy Satra: This satra is located at Dinjoy, about 5 km north of Chabua township. Amongst the twelve main devotees of Gopal Atadev, the distinguished devotee Anirudha Dev founded a satra first at Bisnubalikakunshi village of North Lakhimpur. . (History of Assam)

Moderkhat Satra: It is an extension of Dinjoy Satra. When Sidanandadeb Dinjoy was the head priest of Dinjoy Satra, his brother Chandra Kantadev established the Moderkhat Satra of Moderkhat.

Koli Aai Thaan: It is one of the oldest thaans of Dibrugarh. The Koli Aai Thaan is a very famous tourist spot of Dibrugarh, which is dedicated to Koli Aai, the daughter of the head priest of the Dibraru Satra. (History of Assam).

Kundar Ata Thaan: Kundar Ata Thaan is one of the important places of Mayamoria's mythological belief and worship. This 'Thaan' is also known as Bogoritalia Porbotia Thaan. It is about 15 k.m away from Chabua Railway Station. Devotees from distant places come to visit the thaan every year to have a sight of the thaan or to have a picnic in the lap of beautiful nature around.

The Na-Pukhuri: The Na-Pukhuri, the conglomeration of nine ponds, is situated at the south-eastern corner of Tinsukia town. A great historical monument of the Muttock kingdom (1788-1842), it was constructed during the reign of the last Muttock king, Sarbananda Singha



Tinkunia Pukhuri: As per the direction of Sarbananda Singha, Godha Baruah dug a triangular-shaped pond in Bengmara, which is known as 'Tinkunia Pukhuri'. In 1884 Dibru-Sadiya Railway line was constructed and a station was set up near the Tinkunia Pukhuri, which was named Tinsukia.

Tipuk Satra: The historic Mayamoria Tipuk Simaluguri Bajrapur Satra is situated in Kardoiguri area under Hapjan Mouza of Doomdooma of Tinsukia district. This area is now facing a grave threat from the erosion caused by the Dangari River. In order to discuss this problem, a public meeting was held in the Satra on June 30 under the stewardship of the Satradhikar Sri Sri Lachan Ch. Goswami.

Dehing Patkai Festival is an annual event celebrated at Lekhapani in Assam's Tinsukia district. The festival gets its name from the magnificent Patkai Hills and the lively Dehing River. Organized by the Government of Assam, this festival offers numerous opportunities for entertainment and enjoyment to tourists. It was first inaugurated in December 2002, with the then President of India, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, gracing the occasion as the Chief Guest. The festival showcases a different of attractions, including tribal exhibitions, tours highlighting Assam's rich tea heritage, golfing, thrilling adventure sports, and wildlife excursions. An important highlight for history enthusiasts is the tour of the World War II cemeteries. The festival also provides an opportunity to explore the historic Stillwell Road, which once served as a route to Myanmar, often referred to as the 'Golden Land.' Additionally, visitors can enjoy elephant safaris, participate in the Wilderness Food Festival, explore handicraft fairs, and witness cultural performances organized as part of the celebrations.

Summary and Conclusion:

The tourism industry has increasingly come to be recognized as an important economic, environmental, and social force, the impact of which can bring both prosperity and adversity to a country. The objective of any tourism development scheme should undoubtedly be the enhancement of revenue, including foreign exchange, the creation of job opportunities for local youth and communities concerned, and providing a boost to trade and commerce. To achieve this objective, an integrated tourism development policy is necessary.

When tourism is carefully planned and managed in a socially responsible way, it can provide a wide range of socio-cultural benefits to the local population. One of the significant advantages of tourism is its ability to uplift the standard of living for local communities. By attracting visitors, tourism generates income that can be used to improve community facilities, infrastructure, and essential public services.



The development of tourism creates employment opportunities for locals, promotes entrepreneurship, and stimulates other sectors of the economy, ultimately leading to better living conditions for the residents.

Moreover, tourism plays a crucial role in preserving the rich cultural heritage of Assam. In the absence of tourism, rapid modernization and general development might result in the gradual loss of traditional art forms, customs, and cultural practices. Tourists are particularly drawn to the unique cultural expressions of Assam, including its music, dance, theatre, handicrafts, rituals, festivals, and traditional ways of life. The interest of visitors in these cultural aspects not only promotes awareness but also motivates the local population to maintain and rejuvenate their traditions. Essentially, tourism becomes a driving force for conserving and revitalizing the cultural identity of the region.

Additionally, the revenue generated from tourism activities — such as entrance fees to cultural sites, charges for performances, and other entertainment costs — can be reinvested into maintaining and enhancing cultural institutions and facilities. This continuous cycle of income supports the upkeep of museums, heritage sites, cultural centres, and performance venues, ensuring their sustainability for future generations.

For tourism to flourish effectively, there must be adequate infrastructure in place. This includes reliable water supply systems, efficient transportation networks, consistent electricity, proper sewage and waste management systems, and modern telecommunication services. Careful planning is essential to assess the current infrastructure and forecast the needs based on future tourism growth. Without proper infrastructure, the tourism experience can suffer, which in turn could harm the reputation and appeal of the destination.

An important aspect of sustainable tourism development is involving local communities in the decision-making processes. When residents have a voice in how tourism evolves in their area, it helps mitigate potential negative impacts and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility towards maintaining the destination's appeal. Initiatives such as creating local tourism forums and conducting public awareness campaigns are vital in educating residents about the numerous benefits that tourism can bring to their communities.

The private sector has always occupied a pivotal role in the tourism industry, often leading the way in providing quality services and facilities. Therefore, government policies should focus on motivating private sector participation, particularly in the development, management, and maintenance of tourist



amenities. The state government must also cooperate with various departments to prioritize infrastructural development in key tourist areas and offer incentives to businesses that aim to build facilities meeting international standards.

As part of its promotional strategy, the government should invest in producing high-quality marketing materials like brochures, posters, maps, postcards, and guidebooks. These resources should be widely distributed to travel agencies and tour operators. Furthermore, promoting rural tourism can help showcase the resilient spirit of rural Assam, offering tourists a deeper cultural experience while providing economic opportunities for the rural people.

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