

# Tourism in North East India: Some Critical Issues

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**Abstract**—Although the development of tourism in North East India (NEI) is at nascent stage, it has become one of the fastest growing industries especially in the recent past. Tourism industries are interdependent and are closely connected with other sectors of the economy. It can play a crucial role in economic development. The North East India (NEI) has pristine natural resources, rich bio-diversity and different ethnic groups, each with unique culture - the potential for tourism industries. However, the issue is how to convert those opportunities into sustainable tourism industries given its institutional environment. Institutional infrastructure is very critical to tourism development and the real problem is not that of 'getting the price right' rather to 'get the rules right'. In the light of this, the paper attempts to figure out some institutional issues which may be critical for development of tourism industry in NEI.

**Keywords:** North East India, tourism, Tribal, Community, Corruption, Traditional, Conflict.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that every developing economy or region has a scope and prospect for progress or development. So is the case with the North East India (NEI) especially in the field of tourism industry with pristine natural resources, rich bio-diversity and rich cultural treasures of different ethnic groups. The less explored regions have significant comparative advantage in their potential to attract tourists in search of authentic new experiences (Wahab, 1974). Tourism industries are interdependent and are closely connected with other sectors of the economy. It is an important sector that plays a crucial role in economic development. The potentials for tourism industries in the North-East need not be repeated again. The issue is how to convert those opportunities into vibrant tourism industries. This simple query has a lot of related issues and concerns that needs to be addressed.

## 2. TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

In the case of North East India, broadly, one can classify tourism infrastructures into four categories.

- a) *Physical infrastructure.* Transportation and communication, Parks and recreation centres, Power and water supply etc.
- b) *Cultural Infrastructure.* Culture, heritage, fairs and festivals, Local art and music, dress and dance, Language and food etc.
- c) *Service Infrastructure.* Banking facilities, Travel agencies, Insurance agencies Tourist guides, Hotels, Hospitals etc.
- d) *Institutional infrastructure.* Social and Political infrastructure

All the above infrastructures are necessary for development of tourism industry and its development is closely connected with other sectors of the economy. Institutional infrastructure is very critical to economic development and the real problem of economic development is not that of 'getting the price right' rather to 'get the rules (institutions) right'(North, 1991). It follows that the real issue of developing tourism industries in NEI lies in creating conducive institutional environment i.e. getting the rules right.

## 3. CRITICAL INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

The following concerns may be critical for development of tourism industry in north east India.

*Corruption:* Corruption is the single largest obstacle to economic development (Kaufmann, 1997; Jain, 2001; Sequeira, 2012). Corruption is an outcome of collusive interaction between agents and private players (demand and supply) for illegal private benefits resulting from institutional failure (formal and informal). It distorts

economic policies and resource allocation and, in effect, wastes resources. It also erodes social capital by creating distrust, conflict and frustration in the society. Systemic and endemic corruption in all the levels (both in private or public) is not exception to North East states. The whole state machinery has been eroded by corruption; even the media and the legal system are infected. The degree of corruption might have reached beyond manageable level in some states. Under such situation, it is not easy to get justice from any kind of injustice inflicted upon a person.

*Conflict among the states and Ethnic groups:* Though North East India represents a cohesive geopolitical entity spatially interference or interdependence among the different states is low. Functionally, internal integration or capital/commodity flows are not common within the region. Most of the economic activities are oriented toward certain points/nodes. The states in NEI represent a polycentric region -several nodes and peripheries with low degree of internal functional integration. The historical and cultural patterns of ethnic identity and regional formation still continue to constraint evolution of modern economy. Land disputes, identity assertion and insurgency often create ethnic conflicts or tensions among the ethnic groups within a state and among different states. Conflict among the states also arises due to lack of clear geopolitical boundaries of the states. Coordination among the states in all the sectors of the economy to create a viable regional economy is the need of the hour.

*Traditional land tenure system:* North eastern region is largely inhabited by tribal. They follow both communal and private holding systems. Most of the tribal lands are without proper boundaries, as a result, dispute over tourist spots and pristine forest land continues and in many instances it became a source of conflict among the different tribal communities, between tribal communities and others including state. Commercialisation of lands and forest resources has further created more disputes not only within tribal communities but between the state and tribal communities.

*Militancy or Insurgency:* Militancy continues to pose a serious threat to peace and development in all the states. It has crippled the economies of the north eastern states. However, the larger issue is state's failure to come up with comprehensive policy to deal with militancy problem even after six decades. State government and

central government approaches to militancy problem are often not well coordinated and differences also arise. The state's inability to provide clear cut road-map for peace and security continues to create frustration in the region. Further, this situation is often exploited by politicians, bureaucrats, armies, local leaders to further their personal interests i.e. to acquire more power and wealth. People have started doubting the capability and sincerity of the government to bring lasting peace and security in the region.

*Competition from East:* Opening economy to outside world brings both threat and opportunities. Act East Policy may help improve physical connectivity between NEI and South East Asia countries and may generate a huge economic opportunities as well as increase competition from outside in all the sectors of the economy. However competition from outside may economically disadvantaged the local entrepreneurs /farmers if inflow of goods and services from outside is not regulated. Influx illegal immigrant from Myanmar can pose a serious threat to not only NEI economy but also demography and security of the region. The concern is how to ensure that indigenous people are able to seize such opportunities and protect the infant economy of the region from stiff competition coming from East.

*Need for Act West Policy:* Act East Policy is expected to bring better connectivity (physical infrastructure) between NEI and the west (the rest of India) and hence increase NEI economy exposure to the west. While calculating expected benefits from Act East Policy one should not forget the funny 'Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson Camping joke.'<sup>1</sup> The marginalization of tribal in Tripura, influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Nepal are reality. Tripura represents a classic example of indigenous people reducing to minority in their own land due to unregulated influx of outsiders from west. The influx of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants has not only created demographic, cultural and economic problem to indigenous people but also to the security of all the north-eastern states. The immigrants may seize economic opportunities generated by various development policy of the government and compete out nascent local entrepreneurs or start-ups.

A comprehensive North East Regional Development Policy is required to seize the expected economic opportunities and check the expected threat from Act East policy coming from both East and West. Such policy

may safeguard the indigenous people from their land and enhance their competitive advantage over their competitors from outside during the catch-up period.

*The centre policy towards NEI:* The government of India rules a part of NEI through its controversial colonial law -Arm Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) 1958.Under AFSPA regime, in reality, military has complete control over law and order of the state without any regard for human rights and accountability to the law of the land. Civilians were killed even on mere suspicion and women were raped because of immunity from prosecution.<sup>ii</sup>While AFSPA may be effective tool for counter-insurgency yet it negatively affects every economic activity of the civilians, even inflow of tourists to the region. Army often take over the role of local police and development as counter-insurgency strategy. Heavy militarization of the north eastern states projects insecurity of life NEI to the outside world.

The sincerity and capability of government of India in handling the various militant groups on the negotiating tables is critical to economic development NEI. There is a genuine apprehension whether government of India will do its best to accommodate the rich culture of NEI or annihilate them culturally. How long will the government of India's strategic policy take the precedence of economic development policy of the north-east? Imposition of majority language upon minority groups in education institutions, restriction or control of food habits minority groups on the pretext of nation building (national integration) will only annihilate the rich varied cultures of north eastern minority ethnic groups which otherwise promise a huge scope for cultural tourism.

Adhoc economic development policy from successive government reflects the failure to appreciate the real problems and difficulties of NEI. Development programme like MGNREGA has created more problems than short term solution it has created. It has negatively affected traditional social institutions (like village council), rampant destruction of forest, most of the news roads lead to virgin forests for exploitation of natural resources rather than to markets. It has encouraged influx of wage-labourers into villages from outside the state - constructions of bridges, buildings, canals, roads.

*Issue of sustainability:* The issue of sustainable tourism has become a widely discussed topic in the

recent past. Land holding and use system of the tribal may impede eco-tourism. Population pressure on land and the practice of shifting cultivation/jhuming may pose a serious threat on ecotourism. Improved accessibility to tourist spots and recreation centres in forest land may induce villagers to use surrounding forest land for jhuming or exploitation of forest resources especially fauna and flora.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Tourism can play a crucial role in economic development. Tourism industries are interdependent and are closely connected with other sectors of the economy. The North East India (NEI) has pristine natural resources, rich bio-diversity and different ethnic groups, each with unique culture - the potential for tourism industries. However, the issue is how to convert those opportunities into sustainable tourism industries given its institutional environment. Institutional infrastructure is very critical to tourism development and the real problem is not that of 'getting the price right' rather to 'get the rules right'. But it does not mean that the physical infrastructures are unimportant. Once conducive environment is created with right institutions, it will attract investors or entrepreneurs to develop physical infrastructure driving by profit motive.

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Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson go on a camping trip.

After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend.

"Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

"I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes" replies Watson.

"And what do you deduce from that?"

Watson ponders for a minute.

"Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets.

Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo.

Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe."

But what does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes is silent for a moment. "Watson, you idiot!" he says.

"Someone has stolen our tent!"

<sup>1</sup>Horror of Operation Blue Bird 1987 speaks the real power the army enjoy in the field

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