

# Tourism Potentiality And Infrastructure Planning With Special Reference To The Dehing-Patkai Region: An Analysis

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## PROLOGUE

Tourism has become a competitive industry in the North-East region of India in the recent past and as an industry, tourism is the largest in terms of revenue generation as well as an employer in the world. It is a multi-dimensional activity with versatile positive socio-economic impact. The economic impact of tourism is manifold due to its high multiplier effects and strong inter-sectarian linkages with agriculture, manufacturing, construction, etc. Today, many nations of the World under the auspices of the UNO, and the WTO have adopted Tourism Satellite Account (TSA). The recent data available shows a growth of 1.6% in tourism receipts as compared to growth in the world's GDP. The creation of employment is also 1.5% faster than the world's average. The future projection by the WTO is also very impressive. It is observed that the present incidence of travelling is only 8% of the people having such a competence. Until 1960, tourism as a gainful economic activity was hardly conspicuous. During 1969-70, the global tourism scenario started following a consistently rising trend (two and half times the last decade) in terms of arrivals and receipts. The number registered a tenfold increase during 1970-2000 as compared to 1960-70. The improved safety measures, changes in geo-political situations in the World order like breaking up of the Soviet union, emergence of Eastern Europe, dismantling of borders, formation of the European Union, etc. and above all, the technological up gradation in the civil aviation sector are attributable to the persistent growth in the world tourism scenario (Deb, 2006).

In the present times, Information Technology has changed the very dimension and structure of the tourism business and, therefore, tourism is rightly perceived to be a key sector for attention during the 21st century. Countries like China, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia are paradise for tourists of different interests. About 78.5 lakh foreign tourism resources attract more than 8 lakh-foreign tourists per annum. While most of the developing countries are making long strides in attracting foreign tourists, India's position is far from satisfactory. During 1997, India could count only 20.37 lakh foreign tourists. While the ratio of international to domestic tourists is about 1:10; in case of India, it is almost 1:80 (Deb, 2006). India's contribution to international arrivals of world tourism is meagre 0.38% as against close to 5% of the domestic tourism worldwide.

## THE DEHING PATKAI REGION

The Dehing Patkai encompasses a large area covering the districts of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh in Assam and part of Arunachal Pradesh (the districts of Tirap, Changlang and lower Dibang Valley). The whole tract of land covering the two banks of the river "Buri-Dehing" (a branch of the river Diyun that originates from the Patkai range and bifurcates near Miao in Arunachal Pradesh) is the Dehing Patkai region. On being bifurcated, one branch of the river Diyun viz. Noa Dehing reaches the river Luhit, while the other Buri Dehing dips down into the great Brahmaputra; thereby creating a vast land mass- the river island yet to be traced. Though the whole belt of the Dehing Patkai has great significance from various counts, its discovery is of recent origin. The history of Assam and that of the World War II are very closely related to this area (Barua, 2003).

The Dehing Patkai area comes under the country's richest North - East bio-geographic zone and Brahmaputra Valley Biotic Province. It is a part of the world's bio-diversity hotspot. The whole region is the homeland of several hundred species of plants, animals, birds and orchids; which include several rare and unique varieties too (Handique, 2006). The Govt. of Assam by a notification dated 19th June, 2004 declared creation of the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary, covering a part of the greater Dehing Patkai region, falling within the territory of Assam under the Digboi and

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Dibrugarh forest divisions. The whole area of Dehing Patkai is fabricated with a large number of ethnic tribes. They mostly belong to Mongolian blood and are socio - culturally related to the South-East Asian countries like Thailand and Cambodia including Myanmar. In addition to these ethnic tribes of Mongolian origin, tea tribes and various non-tribal communities live in this vast area from time immemorial with their respective socio-cultural practices (Barua, 2003).

## **TOURISM POTENTIALITY AT THE DEHING PATKAI REGION**

The tourism potentiality of the Dehing Patkai belt is immense with a combination of human, natural, cultural, ethnic beauty, religious attractions, heritage sites and deep forests. Most foreign travellers today look for ethnic and cultural mosaic, adventure and eco-tourism; while a domestic tourist is enthused by religious attractions, wildlife, flora and fauna (Bairagi, 2003). In all these areas, the Dehing Patkai region has tremendous scope for attraction. To mention a few, one can enjoy the socio- cultural lifestyle (their food habit, dress, ornaments, religious practices, games and sports, etc.) of the large number of ethnic tribes like Singphos, Noctes, Tai Phakes, Wangchos, Tangsas, Sonowals, Kacharis, Duanias, Khamtis, Deoris, Sema Nagas and many more in addition to those of non-tribals like Ahoms, Morans, Mottacks, Tea Garden Labourers Communities, Nepalise, etc. (Bairagi, 2003). The ethnic festival viz. Dehing Patkai Festival organized annually under the Margherita Sub-Division in the Tinsukia District of Assam is a unique opportunity for the tourists to enjoy (as if under the some roof) the diverse cultural and heritage mosaic of various ethnic tribes and communities dwelling in this belt within an integrated cultural pattern in a spirit of unity in diversity. The Dibru-Saikhowa National Park ( rich in bio-diversity, Salix forest, wild animals like Tiger, Elephant, Gangatic Dolphin, Hollok Gibbon, White Winged Wood Duck, Black Breasted Parrot Bill, etc.) ; the Maguri Beel (hotspot for bird-watchers); the Bherajan-Borjan Padomoni Wildlife Sanctuary (ideal for bird watching and private studying) - all within a radius of 12 kms from Tinsukia town are most attractive for tourists. The Namdapha Tiger Reserve in Changland district of Arunachal Pradesh is still another bio-diversity hotspot with Tiger, Leopard, Snow Leopard and Clouded Leopard.

The splendid scenic beauty of Rukmini Island in the midst of the great Brahmaputra with its lovely sand beaches, crystal blue water canals, beautiful migratory birds from central Europe and Siberia, Asiatic Wild Buffalo and the Gangatic Dolphin give a rare experience and enthusiasm to the tourists. The lush green Rain Forest patch of Joypur, Dirok and Upper Dehing located within a radius of 100 kms from Tinsukia are ideal for a wide variety of flora and fauna, and also for trekking. Roing, the Headquarters of Lower Dibang Valley district of Arunachal Pradesh, is still another place of tourist attraction with versatile opportunities of living an eco friendly life – very close to the nature, offering opportunities to enjoy adventure tourism like trekking through the snow-capped Mayadia pass at an altitude of about 2,660 meters to see the panoramic view of the alpine forest; Sally lake, Mahoe lake (located at an attitude of 1640 meters is the only oligotrophic lake in India); Mahoe and Dibang Wildlife Sanctuaries, etc.

While trekking and enjoying the scene beauty of Sadiya, about 70 kms away from Tinsukia town, one can avail the opportunity to pay a visit to the famous Kesaikhati temple. The Hindu mythology speaks about the story of Parashuram Kund, located in the Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh about 150 kms far from the township of Tinsukia. Every year during Mokal Sankrantice Magh Bihu (mid January) , host of pilgrims from different parts of the country come here for legendary “*holy dip*” in the “*Kund*” and wash their sins away. A grand fair on the occasion is also held. The trip also gives tourists the opportunity of enjoying the splendid scenic beauty, rafting and angling on the river Lohit in addition in trekking up and down the hill to reach up to the large “*Glow Lake*”.

Being a prominent industrial belt of the entire North East India, tourists here get not only the opportunity of enjoying the scenic beauty of century old lush green tea gardens, but also a peek into the manufacturing process and the unique culture that thrives within the plantations of Assam - the Coal mines under the North-Eastern Coal Fields near Margherita; one of the world's oldest functioning crude oil refineries and oil museum at Digboi and plywood manufacturing units at Tinsukia, Margherita and their vicinity. In addition, the sprawling British era clubs within these industrial establishments offer tourists the unique opportunity of amusement through their standard quality golf courses, tennis courts, billiard tables, bars, swimming pools, etc.

Thus, the whole region of Dehing Patkai has a tremendous potential for development of the tourism industry. The strength of this region lies in the product quality which can create a unique experience that most travellers now look for. It is a combination of all types of tourist interests. More particularly, the unique bio-diversity of the region has

wide opened its scope for development of the tourism industry.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

For any activity, infrastructural requirements play a vital role. While planning tourism, the prime need is to understand the future trends and issues that are likely to shape the future and accordingly develop the infrastructural base to harness the existing potential (Gogoi, 2007). Infact, when we speak of infrastructure for tourism development of any area in a backward region like that of North-East India; where the unique tourism potentials remain untapped for want of adequate infrastructure; the effort should be total and at the macro level. For this, all the states including the North-Eastern Council (NEC) will have to undertake a lot of work to harness the tourism potential of the entire region.

As an Indian administrative philosopher (Mr. M.P. Bezbaruah, IAS) observed : *“For getting maximum effectiveness, tourism development in the North-East must be an integrated one, where the strength of each state complements the other. Tourism being a multi- sectoral activity, in an ideal situation, the program of the departments like roads, forests, culture, etc. can supplement the total tourism effort. As such, tourism should be accepted as one of the thrust areas of Govt. policy. The policy must be futuristic and imaginative. Considering the multidisciplinary nature of tourism, the policy must not be just a sectoral policy of the tourism department, but a policy of the Government as a whole.”* (Bezbaruah)

In the light of the above discussion, the researcher highlights some of the important areas of infrastructural need to harness the immense tourism potential of the Dehing Patkai belt in particular, and the North Eastern Region of India in general:

✿ The distance factor, cost of travel, hygienic and hassle-free rail and road journey are important considerations to attract tourists. Most people travel for leisure, and hassle free enjoyment than anything else. This is an important area that Assam, in particular, and the North Eastern Region in general, should take serious note of. The internal rail and road networks and the sub-standard condition of the existing roads must have to be improved (Deb, 2006). To entertain ethnic tourism, connectivity with the ethnic tribes' prone areas needs serious attention. This as a corollary, will invite a boost to their economic conditions as well. Moreover, national highways within the town areas should be of one-way roads to avoid hassles in traffic.

✿ The reopening of the historic Stilwell Road that stretches from Lakhapani (near Ledo) of Dehing Patkai belt in Assam to Kunming in Yunnan province of South China via Myanmar would be a viable link for connecting India to the South-East Asian nations like Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines, etc. (Gogoi, 2007). Since Myanmar is a member of the ASEAN, India is a close trade partner, and there is ample scope for expanding trade and tourism with the strong ASEAN trading block having combined GDP of \$ 737 billion, via Myanmar through the Stilwell road. Since the Dehing Patkai region has high potentiality to attract foreign tourists from the South-East Asian countries including China and Myanmar; as also people from other parts of India, given adequate infrastructure, would find it both convenient and cheaper to travel around those countries; and hence, reopening of the Stilwell road will give a real boost to the tourism effort of the Dehing Patkai belt, in particular, and the whole region of North East in general. The matter has already attracted the attention of the three nations and is under active consideration of the Govt. of India under the *“Look-East”* policy (Purkayastha, 2007).

✿ Lack of high standard hotels and resorts in the Dehing Patkai belt is an important deficiency. It is ,therefore, pertinent to invite private investors in the area. One such report by the Minister of State for Tourism, Govt. of Assam, Mr. M. I. Laskar at Tea Tourism festival in Jorhat, Assam said that the Taj Group's interest in setting up hotels in the tea belt of Assam is encouraging. However, establishment of a resort and a shopping centre at the Lakhapani and Udaypur areas of Dehing Patkai belt may be recommended in this regard.

✿ Today's tourism marketing is characterized more by Information Technology driven micro marketing than macro deceptions. Tourists want specific information on their specific areas of interest. Therefore, tourism managers should be trained and well- equipped to face this emerging trend.

✿ Tourism as a subject under the curricula at the University and College levels is yet to be introduced in Assam as also in other North-Eastern states. Introduction of the subject would not only create local skills to serve and supplement the tourism effort; but would also contribute significantly towards continuous qualitative improvement of the industry through persistent research and constancy services, including seminars, workshops, symposia, etc.

✿ It is being observed that some of the tribal people are gradually abandoning their traditional cultural practices in domestic useables, dress habits and even in house building in the name of modernization. The trend, if not checked, may appear as a mighty blow to the tourism effort. It is, therefore, essential to cajole and motivate the natives to restrain from such practices. The ethnic expositions like Dehing Patkai festival and Disang festival are contributory in this direction.

✿ As a safeguard against gradual exhaustion of tradition and culture of various ethnic groups due to modernization and assimilation, it is essential to setup cultural museums at higher educational centers like universities and colleges with financial accommodation from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Govt. of India. Such museums may be tied up with that of tourism of such institutions (Deb, 2006). Else, the institutions may set up tribal research study centers and maintain such museums in addition to other research oriented activities. Such museums, if maintained in right earnest with gusto, will be unique places of attraction for many tourists.

✿ Planning for tourism should be based on a selective approach (Yadav, 2003). Every district should draw up a benchmark survey of tourism potential of the area. The products which satisfy primary local requirements should be included in the District Development Plan. Those of regional attractions should be taken care of by the State Plan, and schemes of national and international importance should be taken up with the help of National and International Agencies. This will give wide coverage to the resource generation exercise for the purpose.

✿ Tourism is primarily a private sector driven industry. Most tourism successful countries have built strong partnership with the private sector. Therefore, the states of the North East region must come up with bold positive policies to enable private initiatives to grow.

✿ Last, but not the least, tourism and peace have a symbolic relationship. The prevailing turbulent situation in the entire North East India is not conducive for the investors and tourists to penetrate. However, we shall have to face the challenge keeping in mind that most factors contributing to such a situation are the fallout of the unemployment problem faced by the youths of the region. The immense employment potential of tourism industry will serve as a positive check against such malice. A sincere and planned effort by the Govt. can solve many problems.

## EPILOGUE

Under the present situation, we must take advantage of the tourism boom and for that, it is required to evolve continuously changing strategies, take planned and co-ordinated steps and provide tourism as a priority place in our planning and place this historic area in a better position in the World map. It is a good indication that the awareness at present is gaining momentum. Thus, for tourism development in the North-East region, the political will and commitment on the part of leadership at the central, state and district level is of prime importance and so is the association of the local people.

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