

Prospect of Rural Development in Assam Through Tea Tourism: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

The present study is undertaken to investigate the knowledge about the prospect of rural development through tea tourism in Assam. It is well known that Assam is the largest producer of tea in India and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. In the same way it is a province in India that has various nature based tourist destinations. It attracts tourists that are nature lovers. Such type of tourists will surely prefer tea tourism because it has close proximity with nature tourism. The history of tea tourism has a recent origin in Assam, like other parts of India. Tea estates bungalows are often well-preserved relic of the colonial era, with large courtyards, swimming pools, century-old trees, and green lawns that capture an old-world charm. The tea gardens and its surroundings have enough potentialities to attract tourists. For the development of tea tourism all the stakeholders must adopt some specific and systematic strategies with proper directions.

Keywords: Nature Tourism, Tea Tourism, Rural Development, Assam

1. Introduction:

There are lots of literature regarding the meaning and definitions of rural development. But scholars are not in a position till the date to give a proper and exact definition about it. It is a concept that refers to the all round development of the people of rural areas. The concept of rural development can be assigned to the initiatives that try to improve the socio economic condition of the poor people living in the rural areas. Kartar Singh in 1986 opined that as a discipline, it is multidisciplinary in nature representing an intersection of agricultural, social, behavioral, engineering, and management sciences. In the words of Robert Chambers, rural development is a strategy to enable a specific group of people, poor rural women and men, to gain for themselves and their children more of what they want and need. It involves helping the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas to demand and control more of the benefits of rural development. The group includes small scale farmers, tenants, and the landless. Now, tourism sector is a type of industry which has the capacity to provide numerous scopes for the development of living condition of the rural people. Generally speaking, it is one of the fastest growing industries of the world. According to World Tourism Organization (1994), 'Tourism includes activities in which people travel and stay outside their usual place for not more than one year leisure, business, and other purposes'. It can be divided into various segments like ecotourism, historical tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, ethnic tourism, religious tourism, health tourism etc. With the advancement of time there are also other sub-segments growing within the tourism industry. Among them tea tourism is important one. It is a growing niche segment within the broader realm of tourism

industry. It has close proximity with rural tourism, nature tourism, ecotourism etc. Tea tourism is such a wonderful commercial organization for leisure that can fulfill the taste of visitors' interests. Tea tourism gives visitors the ability to make use of all tea related knowledge and experience. Tourists can spend time amidst the natural beauty of tea gardens; enjoy nature walks and trekking because the geographical locations of tea gardens are such types. The current study aims to demonstrate the potential of tea tourism in Assam a province of India as a tourism destination and establish the relationship between tea tourist attitudes and expectations with destination attributes to take corrective action to improve the tea tourist destination. The history of tea tourism has a recent origin in Assam, like other parts of India. Tea estates bungalows are often well- a preserved relic of the colonial era, with large courtyards, swimming pools, century-old trees, and green lawns that capture an old-world charm. The tea gardens and its surroundings have enough potentialities to attract tourists. If vineyards in European countries can be a significant tourist destination, the tea gardens of Assam can be an important tourist destination of India. All age old bungalows can be refurbished to cater to the need and tastes of foreign Tourists. Tourist has the thrill and chance to pluck tea leaves in these places, go on nature walks, trekking and rafting, and even play golf at the links. So, by following the forecasting statement, there are many potentialities in the tea gardens of Assam to promote the tea tourism industry within the tea garden boundaries. In this context we can have an overview about the tea industry in Assam. Assam is the largest producer of tea in India and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. Though the species grew widely in the hills and forests of Assam since time immemorial but the organized tea plantation in Assam is associated with the colonial period. The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old and it can be traced back to 1837 A.D. as the first experimental tea estates in Assam was established in 1837 at Chabua in Dibrugarh district in upper Assam. But latter on the first tea company, namely the Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam and it is followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858. With this history of organized tea industry in Assam, the history of the tea community of Assam also develops. The tea industry requires huge manual labor force for the ground work. As there were shortage of labour during the initial stage so the planters had to hire huge numbers of people from different regions of colonial India. The people were imported from different places, e.g. the Mundan & Gonds from Bihar, Santals, Tantis & Bhumij from Bengal & Bihar, Orangs from Bihar & Orissa, Goalas from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh and Bogas from Tamil Nadu (Kar, 2005). These people had different culture, dialects, rituals, religious beliefs with different identity. But, in due course of time they started to assimilate with the local people and adopt the local culture leaving behind their own cultural traits. This assimilation grew a new identity among the people of different identities which is now regarded as tea garden community. From the above information we can have an idea that the tea industry in Assam has a distant past and it has created an indigenous culture. This cultural landscape also can be an important aspect for the promotion of cultural tourism through tea industry. This ecology and cultural assets in the tea gardens of Assam can be integrated to the other assets of tourism industry which will provide enough opportunities for the rural development. Through this study attempt has been made to analyze the prospect of rural development through tea tourism in the study area.

2. Review of Related Literature:

Review of literature is an integral part of systematic research. It enables the researcher to be familiar with what is already known and what is yet to be known in the area of the study. In other words it is a

tool for defining the problem, recognizing its significance and suggesting promising data. It is an information gathering device which helps for the appropriation of research design. Scholars are of the opinion that there is lots of scope for developing tea tourism in the tea producing countries of the world. Tea, beyond being a beverage, symbolizes sustainable cultural travel known as tea tourism (Zhou et al., 2016). As the second most consumed drink after water (Grassi et al., 2009), tea is significant in the global market (Basu et al., 2010). The tea plant, native to China, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia, now grows in other suitable climates (Hall et al., 2004). Countries like India see tea tourism as lucrative (Goonwalla and Neog, 2011), converting large lands into tea gardens (Chen et al., 2021). Tea tourism, as described by (Jolliffe, 2007) is "tourism that is inspired by an interest in the history, customs, and use of tea." Zhang (2004) portrayed the growth of tea tourism as a means of showcasing tea-growing regions with beautiful surroundings or distinctive historical backgrounds. A destination's tea culture is promoted through a variety of activities, including sightseeing, education, shopping, and other types of entertainment and tourism. According to (Fernando et al., 2017) and special interest tourism (SIT), it is said to be a new niche market that has evolved by tailoring a particular tourism product to fit the demands of a niche market (Jolliffe, 2007). SIT entails traveling to locations to fulfill one's personal requirements and unique interests in a certain area or location (Liu, 2019). Tea tourism is one of the alternative forms of tourism which is being operated in the tea growing regions in the world (K. C. Koththagoda and S. C. Thushara 2016). India is renowned as the greatest country for producing tea, and in the past 50 years, the planted tea area has grown by 160 percent while production has climbed by 304 percent (Shah and Pate, 2016). Tea gardens, part of "Agri-Tourism", create jobs and attract visitors with natural beauty and cultural activities (Ananya, 2021; Datta, 2018). Visitors can enjoy tea flavors, cultural performances, and activities like tea leaf picking and nature hikes (Goonwalla and Neog, 2011). Globally, tea tourism involves visiting tea gardens, experiencing tea culture, participating in tea ceremonies, and engaging in tea-related activities, blending natural attractions with cultural experiences (Cheng et al., 2010; Gupta et al., 2022). It offers immersive experiences catering to niche tourism demand (Kler & Wong, 2022). The global expansion of tea began in the mid-17th century, marked by Europe's first shipment from Japan in 1610 AD, facilitated by Portuguese and Dutch traders (Baruah & Pradip, 2011). In India, Assam's tea history under British rule contrasts with Britain's own tea tradition dating to the seventeenth century (Kalita & Jyoti, 2019). Tea gardens provide visually stunning destinations with lush plantations against mountainous backdrops (Willson et al., 2012). (Kumar et al., 2023) mentions that Visits to tea gardens in this country also involved, if at all feasible, overnight stays. Visitors come to see how the tea gardens operate and to learn about the tea business. Jorhat, the largest tea-producing district in India, is the first place that springs to mind when discussing tea tourism in Assam. For the Assam tea tourist event in Jorhat, hundreds of people travel there every year. As an "alternative form" of tourism, tea tourism is acknowledged as an instrument for socio-economic development (Su, Wall & Wang, 2019; Su, Wall, Wang & Jin, 2019). In addition to providing income, tea tourism has promoted cultural heritage and social cohesion. Tea plays a significant role in the culture of nations such as India and Sri Lanka, and also holds great importance in the realm of tourism. Furthermore, tea has taken a variety of forms in different cultures (Jolliffe, 2007). Therefore, previous research established tea as a strong area of research as tea traditions combine tourists with cultural heritage (Bohne, 2021). It has also strengthened the rural economy through social and infrastructure enhancements (Casalegno et al., 2019; Magar & Kar, 2016). Tea tourism is growing in India (Sarmah, 2020; Solak & Amin, 2020) but this form of niche tourism needs time and proper planning to develop.

3. The Significance of the Study:

The study is undertaken to investigate the knowledge about the prospect of rural development through tea tourism in Assam. It is well known that Assam is the largest producer of tea in India and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. The legacy of tea gardens in Assam extends from the colonial period. In the present scenario with the advancement of tourism industry the tea gardens of Assam has lots of potentialities for the development of tourism sector. This development will surely enhance the living standard of the people of the rural areas of Assam where the tea gardens are located mostly. There is no doubt that Tea Tourism is a contemporary concept researched and talked about since the beginning of the 21st century. It is expected that such type of studies will help the social thinkers and policy makers to take initiatives for the rural development of Assam in particular and India as a whole. The future researchers also will be encouraged to think in that way in near future. Moreover, the present study will show the potentialities of the tea gardens as lucrative tourist destinations in Assam. This study will also suggest the ways to promote Tea Tourism and to protect its natural resources and biodiversity.

4. Objective of the Study:

The aim of this study is to find out the possible ways to develop and promote tea tourism in Assam for rural development by identifying the potentialities of tea tourism. Furthermore, the study aims to highlight the promotional tools through which the tea estates of Assam can be transformed as a tourism destination.

1. To highlight the scope of tea tourism in Assam.
2. To promote the Tea Estates as a tourist destination in Assam.
3. To provide some policy recommendations for the development of tea tourism in the state.

5. Materials and Methods:

Research methodology is the most important aspect of research work and is a way to systematically solve research problems. It facilitates the research work and provides reliability and validity to it. The information collected for the purpose of the study is based on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data include information gathered from firsthand experience acquired through survey, field verification and conversation with the key informants. Intensive observation was also made to acquire necessary information. Secondary data was obtained from various published and unpublished sources like relevant literature, news papers, journals, related websites, social media and others. The nature of the present study is explorative and the whole work has been done by descriptive as well as analytical methods.

6. Limitation of the Study:

As stated above, Tea Tourism is a contemporary concept researched and talked about since the beginning of the 21st century. This study was conducted through limited data sources because of limited time frame and word constraints. It is expected that future studies can be conducted by using extensive primary data among potential tea tourists or tea tourism experts with the legitimate time tenure with adequate support from different agencies.

7. Discussion on Findings:

Information reflected in annual reports of government and non government agencies show that Assam

has a handsome amount of tea production at present times. It is the largest producer of tea in the country and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. It is true that tea has been growing in Assam since time immemorial because of the favorable climate and quality of the soil. But, the history of organized tea plantation in Assam is associated with the colonial era. The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old and it can be traced back to 1837 A.D. Record shows that the first experimental tea estates in Assam was established in 1837 at Chabua in Dibrugarh district in upper Assam. But latter on the first tea company, namely the Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam and it is followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858. During the past several decades lots of organized tea gardens have been developed throughout the state which provides a scenic beauty. Because of the climatic aspects or other related matters most of the tea gardens are situated in the interior rural areas or in other sense we can assume that the areas near tea gardens have not been developed because of some strategic purposes. Though there are lots of commercial values of tea in the global market but the tea workers are not treated in a moderate way by the tea planters of present times just like the colonial rulers. They are exploited in every possible way. Because of this inhuman approach from all concerned there occur agitations against the tea garden management authorities from time to time. When we talk about rural development it refers to the socio economic development of the rural people by improving their living standard. Tea tourism has lots of potentialities for the socio economic development of the tea garden workers living in the interior and rural areas of Assam. If the socio economic condition of the people of tea gardens and its adjacent areas develop the parameters of rural development in Assam will automatically increase.

Assam is a province in India that has various nature based tourist destinations. It attracts tourists that are nature lovers. Such type of tourists will surely prefer tea tourism because it has close proximity with nature tourism. The lush green tea gardens are the treasure houses of nature with heritage bungalows, scenic beauty, and colorful local people with their enchanting songs, dance and unique culture. Besides the scenic beauty the tea estates in Assam carries the legacy of British luxury with age old unique structured bungalows called as Chang- bungalows made of wood with some distinctive features. Those bungalows can be transformed into home stays for night stay through which the tourists will be able to feel the legacy of British luxury from colonial period. The tea gardens are loaded with different flora and fauna which are locally available and unique. There is lots of scope for developing golf tourism in the lush tea gardens of Assam. As a beverage tea is unique and the people are very enthusiastic about the procedure of its production. The tour to the factories in the tea gardens will surely attract the people from inside as well as outside of the country. By visiting the tea factories each and everybody will be able to see the various stages of tea making which is a complex procedure and at the same time they will be able to taste the different types of Assam tea which are unique in the world. Besides the natural scenic beauty and heritage bungalows with colonial luxury the tea gardens are famous for the fun loving and simple minded people. They are the descendents of those workers who were brought to Assam from various regions of the country by the British rulers for tea plantation works during the colonial period. Now they are the part and parcel of the Assamese society and known as tea tribes. They have distinctive social and cultural identity. They are very vibrant and simple minded people. They have their own folkdances, folksongs, traditional customs, dress code, food habit and fairs and festivals which have been handed down from one generation to other throughout the ages. Showcasing their distinctive culture in an organized manner can be a distinctive tool for the development of tourism in the tea estates of the study area. Simply speaking, with the rich variety of landscape, flora and fauna, heritage

bungalows with colonial luxury and ethnic and cultural diversity of the people, the tea estates of the study area can be very suitable places for tourism venture. The another aspect is that besides enjoying the stay in the tea gardens the tourists can enjoy the beauty of surrounding typical Assamese villages with unique cultural heritage and exquisite handicrafts which will never let them forget their cherished visit. People who love such type of explorations will surely give preferences to visit Assam and will encourage others also to take such tours. Tourists will get the opportunity to interact with nature, wildlife and simultaneously extract the beauty of cultural diversity of the local people.

It is true that there is lots of scope for developing tea tourism in Assam. If planned properly such tourism activities would have significant impact on employment generation, education and income level of local people. If these parameters grow in a significant way because of tea tourism, the socio economic condition including the living standard of the rural people will grow in a significant way. For this there must be a systematic plan for the development of tea tourism in this region. Tourists are unaware about the beauty of the tea estates in Assam. They don't have the idea that these tea estates can be easily visited by everyone to reduce boredom of life. Accommodation, transport and other communication system should be developed and upgraded. Besides the tea gardens there are numerous other potential destinations in Assam that attract tourist throughout all the seasons. All these potential destinations can be integrated into a tourism cluster and that cluster can be linked with other established tourist destinations of nearby areas like National Parks, places with historical monuments, Wildlife Sanctuaries etc. This will increase immeasurably the attractiveness of the potential tourist spots of the study area and it will become an eminent tea tourism destination of our country in near future. For the purpose there must be a well maintained link between management bodies of the tea estates, government agencies, local communities, tour operators, travel agents, hoteliers and concerned stakeholders. At the same time different researchers, national and international journalists, travel and tourism experts from all fields should be invited as guests to acquire firsthand experience and then request should be made to publish their experiences in the magazines, research journals and newspapers. The concerned authority such as the owners of the tea estates should be supportive and cooperative to develop a good destination image of tea tourism in Assam. They can formulate different strategies to preserve these estates in an environmentally balanced way by developing tourism potentialities.

7. Conclusion:

The Indian province, Assam situated in the North – East region of the country has lots of tourist potentialities because of its natural beauty, hilly regions, flora and fauna and weather. The geographical location is also people friendly. Tea tourism can unlock new dimensions of tourism in this state. This research is conducted to study the potentialities of tea tourism of Assam. If tea tourism can be developed in a systematic way it will cater to the development of the rural people in immense way. Tourists always look for some key factors to visit any destination. And a destination tries to provide those to tourists to create an image and to attract more tourists. This study has identified some strategies as recommendations that can be used to promote tea tourism in Assam. It is expected that such strategies will highlight the potentialities of rural development through tea tourism in the study area.

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