

Festivals an Important Component to Promote Tourism: With Special Reference to Meghalaya “The Abode of Clouds”

Indrajit Dutta

Assistant Professor, Department of Travel & Tourism Management, Royal Global University, Guwahati, India

Abstract:

Over the past seven decades, the travel and tourism industry has experienced significant growth and transformation. This evolution has seen a shift from mass tourism to alternative forms of tourism. Of these segments, cultural tourism stands out as one of the oldest and most enduring, consistently drawing a substantial number of tourists. Although the activities associated with cultural tourism have evolved to draw visitors, festivals remain a cornerstone of this segment. Globally, festivals are recognized as fundamental pillars of tourism activity and represent a rapidly growing sector. Festivals play a vital role in showcasing and promoting the cultural fabric of a destination. They play a key role in driving the growth of cultural tourism, supporting both economic prosperity and cultural enrichment. For tourists, cultural festivals offer an enriching experience, providing a deep dive into the cultural extravaganza of host communities. For local artists and artisans, these festivals provide an opportunity to exhibit their skills and craftsmanship, thereby deepening their ties to their cultural heritage. Meghalaya, a picturesque state nestled in the northeastern part of India, is endowed with stunning natural resources and a rich cultural heritage. The state's indigenous people, including the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes, celebrate unique, spectacular, and vibrant festivals. Meghalaya has the potential to become the leading tourism hub of the northeastern circuit due to its cultural richness. This paper aims to explore the importance of festivals in promoting a destination's culture and to offer a comprehensive look at the diverse festivals observed in Meghalaya. Additionally, the study will examine how these festivals play a pivotal role in boosting tourism in the state and identify the socio-cultural benefits they offer.

Keywords: Cultural Tourism; Alternate Tourism, Communities, Roots, Cultural Fabric, Indigenous

INTRODUCTION:

Since ancient times people have travelled to far -flung areas, to explore and to have more meaningful insights of the socio-cultural heritage and practices prevalent in those areas or regions. Over the years, the connection between culture and tourism has grown stronger, leading to the emergence of a distinct form of travel known as cultural tourism. This trend has significantly developed in recent decades. Cultural tourism, which has become quite popular in recent times, saw significant growth during the last two decades of the twentieth century. This form of tourism has been recognized for its potential to boost economic benefits while also aiding in the preservation of cultural heritage and practices. (Richards,2001).

In recent years, cultural tourism has emerged as one of the leading forms of tourism, significantly influencing the economic and socio-cultural growth of tourist-centric nations. This form of tourism attracts visitors interested in experiencing the rich traditions, heritage, and cultural practices of a destination. As tourists seek authentic cultural experiences, they contribute to the local economy by spending on accommodations, food, transportation, and cultural activities, thereby generating revenue and creating jobs. Cultural tourism fosters economic growth by stimulating various sectors, including hospitality, retail, and handicrafts. Local artisans and craftsmen benefit immensely as cultural tourism provides a market for their traditional products, ensuring sustainable livelihoods and encouraging the continuation of traditional crafts. Additionally, cultural festivals and events draw large crowds, further boosting the local economy. In addition to its economic benefits, cultural tourism is vital for socio-cultural development. It supports the preservation and revival of cultural heritage by encouraging communities to maintain their traditions and historical landmarks. This process fosters local pride and strengthens community identity. The interaction between tourists and locals facilitates mutual understanding and respect, thereby enhancing global cultural awareness and tolerance. Moreover, cultural tourism promotes the documentation and interpretation of cultural practices, ensuring their transmission to future generations. Educational programs and workshops related to cultural tourism can also empower local communities by enhancing their knowledge and skills.

Tourists in recent times are looking at more enriching experiences rather than different kinds of entertainment packed in their itineraries (Chang et al, 2014). Festival tourism concept is an offshoot of cultural and event tourism forms and has tremendous potential in development of cultural tourism but also other forms of tourism. This new niche tourism form is getting very popular in recent times and is being able to attract many tourists and create a more meaningful engagement for tourist and the host communities and has the potential to contribute significantly to the economic and cultural development of the host communities of a tourist destination.

One of the prime motivations to host cultural festival events is primarily due to economic gains due to the tourism boom in addition to other socio-cultural benefits. Organizing of annual festival events by organizers at community settings with rich historical and cultural themes is becoming popular and thus creating a cultural image for a destination. The resident communities of a host destination play a crucial role in developing cultural tourism by organizing festivals that highlight the area's rich cultural and traditional heritage. Annual festivals like dance, music, boat, art, food festivals etc has emerged as an important tool under the banner of cultural tourism for promoting tourism in a destination and thereby benefitting both economically and socio-culturally. Festival related events have the potential to generate vast amount of tourism and as a result a lot of sponsorship from government and private agencies get attached (Getz, 1997).

Meghalaya, a picturesque state nestled in the northeastern part of India, is blessed with abundant natural resources and a rich cultural heritage, making it a prime candidate to become the leading cultural tourism hub of the northeastern circuit. The state's breathtaking landscapes, from rolling hills and dense forests to majestic waterfalls and crystal-clear rivers, create a stunning backdrop that captivates visitors. The cultural fabric of Meghalaya is woven with the vibrant traditions of its tribal inhabitants, primarily the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo communities. Each of these tribes celebrates a variety of festivals that are unique, spectacular, and filled with vibrant extravaganza. These festivals transcend mere events; they provide immersive experiences that offer profound insights into the region's traditions, beliefs, and way of life. The Khasi Hills are renowned for the Shad Suk Mynsiem festival, which celebrates the harvest and

expresses gratitude to the gods through dance. In the Jaintia Hills, the Behdienkhlam festival features religious ceremonies and community dances designed to ward off evil spirits and seek blessings. The Garo Hills come alive with the Wangala festival, also known as the 100 Drums Festival, which celebrates the harvest season with rhythmic drumbeats and traditional dances. These festivals showcase the cultural richness of Meghalaya, attracting tourists who seek authentic cultural experiences. The state's dedication to preserving its cultural heritage while promoting tourism ensures that visitors have the opportunity to witness and engage in these vibrant celebrations. Consequently, Meghalaya has the potential to become a leading cultural tourism destination, attracting visitors from across the globe and contributing to the region's socio-economic growth (Sonowal, 2016).

OBJECTIVES:

This paper is based on the following main objectives.

1. To explore the significance of festivals in promoting culture of a place.
2. To recognize and understand the various types of festivals celebrated in Meghalaya.
3. To identify the socio-cultural benefits of festivals to both the tourists and the host communities

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study is empirical in nature with elements of primary and secondary data with a qualitative approach. The primary data is collected through a discussion with the officials of Directorate of Tourism, Directorate of Art and Culture, tourists attending the festivals and prominent travel agencies and tour operators of Meghalaya.

The secondary research was done by reviewing journals, research papers, newspapers articles and related books. Some data has been furnished from the websites of the Government of Meghalaya, Tourism and Art & Culture directorates.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Traditional festivals have successfully attracted a substantial number of tourists and are now acknowledged as a crucial aspect of cultural tourism. Though cultural festivals are recent phenomena's, the research on impacts of cultural festivals has gained importance very quickly. Recent research studies have indicated that culture is the main ingredient in attracting and motivating people to travel (McIntosh and Goldner,1990;Zeppel, 1992). In most of the seasonal tourist centric places, festivals have the capacities to extend the tourist season and generate extra revenue to the tourism stake holders and the governments concerned (Ritchie & Beliveau,1974) and thereby strengthening the local economies by generating extra income, sustaining existing businesses and encouraging new tourism entrepreneurs for start-ups (Mitchell & Wall,1986).

Communities with rich cultural heritage organize festival events to showcase their rich cultural heritage and thereby attracting the tourist and promoting their region, thus it provides opportunities to improve the quality of life and preserve their rich cultural heritage (Cudny et al., 2012; Sharma, Sharma, 2015; Macheke, 2016). Proponents of cultural evolution argue that cultural tourism can stimulate renewed local interest in traditional cultural expressions, thereby strengthening cultural ties and providing local participants with access to tangible benefits (McKean, 1989). Festival tourism includes festivals, rallies, fairs, expositions, sports and cultural life, etc. It has various sizes, a specific theme and hold regularly or

irregularly in the same region in a particular time, it can attract large number of tourists outside the region unlike conventional lifeline of people, events and programs (Lian, 2004).

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS:

In the Indian context, often referred to as the "Land of Festivals," India's incredible diversity has ensured that it remains a country steeped in perpetual celebrations. Throughout the centuries, myriad cultures have contributed to a tapestry of festivals that mark every occasion, whether it's welcoming the arrival of spring or monsoon, celebrating harvests and sowing, or honouring the full moon. These festivities are characterized by vibrant colours, music, folk dances, and songs, creating a mosaic of joyous occasions. Festivals of Meghalaya are diverse and vibrant. They represent the community's agrarian soul and their close relationship with mother nature and their bond with each other as equals. The festivals are intended to be joyful, with expressions of happiness through dance, feasting, and religious observances. Festivals in Meghalaya has been able to attract substantial number of tourists from mainland India and as well as from overseas, but it also helps in promoting the social cultural heritage of the tribal indigenous communities of the state. The tourist visiting the state and participating in the major indigenous festivals of the state are engaged in an enriching experience witnessing the vibrant cultural fabric of the major tribes of the state.

In Meghalaya, festivals and events are strategically crafted to attract tourists, showcasing the state's rich cultural tapestry and natural beauty. These celebrations are not merely traditional gatherings but are thoughtfully designed to offer visitors a unique and immersive experience.

The Wangala Festival, for example, is one of the most prominent events, celebrating the harvest with traditional Garo dances, music, and rituals. Similarly, the Nongkrem Dance Festival provides an enchanting glimpse into Khasi culture with its elaborate dance performances and ceremonial rituals. These festivals are meticulously planned to highlight Meghalaya's indigenous heritage, drawing tourists eager to witness and participate in these vibrant cultural displays. In addition to traditional festivals, contemporary events like the Shillong Autumn Festival, Cherry Blossom festival and the Meghalaya International Film Festival cater to a diverse audience, blending modern entertainment with cultural elements. These events often include musical performances, film screenings, and art exhibitions, attracting both domestic and international tourists. By creating such festivals and events, Meghalaya effectively promotes tourism, boosting the local economy and preserving its cultural heritage. These festivities not only attract tourists but also nurture a sense of pride and unity among local communities, ensuring the preservation of Meghalaya's traditions and customs for future generations. The cultural festivals organized in the state also inspire the younger generation of tribal communities to appreciate the rich cultural practices of their tribes and maintain a strong connection to their heritage, ensuring the preservation of this cultural richness for future generations.

Travel agencies and tour operators in Meghalaya play a vital role in promoting the state's cultural festivals, alongside showcasing its other tourism attractions. By designing tour packages that coincide with festival dates, they can offer tourists a comprehensive and enriching experience. These packages should include visits to the most iconic festivals, such as the Wangala Festival, which celebrates the harvest season with traditional Garo dances and music, or the Nongkrem Dance Festival, which offers a mesmerizing insight into Khasi culture through elaborate dance performances and rituals. In addition to these cultural experiences, tour packages should highlight Meghalaya's natural beauty and adventure opportunities. Visitors can explore the living root bridges of Cherrapunji, the pristine waters of Dawki, and the scenic

landscapes of the East Khasi Hills. By combining festival visits with tours of these natural wonders, travel agencies can create a balanced itinerary that appeals to a wide range of interests. Promotional efforts should emphasize the unique combination of cultural immersion and natural exploration that Meghalaya offers. This approach not only enhances the tourist experience but also supports local communities by increasing attendance at festivals and encouraging the preservation of cultural traditions. Furthermore, well-coordinated tour packages can stimulate the local economy, create jobs, and foster sustainable tourism practices. Ultimately, by highlighting cultural festivals alongside other tourism offerings, travel agencies and tour operators can greatly enhance Meghalaya's tourism sector. This ensures that visitors depart with lasting memories and a profound understanding of the state's vibrant heritage. To avoid commodification of the indigenous cultural practices and heritage, festival organizers and other stake holders have kept all their ancestral cultural practices as authentic the way it was handed over to them from generations.

Some of the major festivals celebrated by the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo indigenous tribes of Meghalaya are as follows:

Nongkrem Dance: This festival is held annually at Smit, the capital of the Khyrim Syiemship, which is 15 kilometres (9 miles) south-west of Shillong. The venue, the Iing Sad itself is a very important symbol of the Khasis – a large, thatched building (or palace) that was constructed without the use of metal parts. The Nongkrem Dance festival is a five-day-long event and there are many rituals performed involving the current royals of the Khyrim Hima (kingdom). An important part of this festival is Ka Pomblang Nongkrem : literally means Goat killing ceremony of Nongkrem. The word Nongkrem is used because the festival was held at Nongkrem, the headquarters of Khyrim state in the past. On the fourth day, a dance is performed by young Khasi men and virgin women of the entire clan who come dressed in their traditional costumes and heavy gold ornaments in front of the Iing Sad (Gurdon, 2010)

Shad Suk Mynsiem Dance: Shad Suk Mynsiem is the Khasi way of offering their thanks to the creator for all the blessings and bountiful harvests received – characterized by many symbolic rituals, dances, and the best of traditional apparel. The three-day festival is usually celebrated after the harvest and before the sowing season in March or April. Shad Suk Mynsiem ('the dance of peaceful hearts') is held during the month of April. Shad Suk Mynsiem is an agrarian festival and celebrates the optimism for the coming year. It is a dance expressing gratitude to God for blessings received in the past years and seeking prosperity for the future.

Beh-dieng-khlam: The most renowned festival of the Jaintia tribe, Behdienkhlam, occurs in July, dedicated to wishing for good health, prosperity, and a bountiful harvest. The festival is joyously celebrated in the town of Jowai, located around 60 kilometres from Shillong. It serves as a plea to the gods to prevent illnesses and spans four consecutive days. Primarily observed among the tribal communities of the hilly Jaintia district, it is cherished by adherents of the 'Niamtre' faith and Hindus alike.

Shad Sukra: The Shad Sukra festival, observed annually by the Jaintia community in April or May, marks the commencement of the sowing season. It holds great significance for Jaintia farmers, who await its arrival before beginning their planting. Rituals and traditional dances accompanied by drums and flutes are performed to invoke blessings for a prosperous and productive season. Both men and women participate in the festivities adorned in traditional attire, adorned with elaborate gold ornaments.

Wangala: The Wangala Festival in Meghalaya is widely celebrated among the Garo community of India. It is a harvest festival dedicated to Saljong, the Sun-God of fertility. This festival signifies the culmination

of hard work in the fields, resulting in a bountiful harvest, and also heralds the onset of winter. Known as the "100 Drums Festival," Wangala involves tribal offerings and rituals to honour Saljong, the Sun God. Typically spanning two days, and sometimes extending up to a week, the festival begins with the "Ragula" ceremony inside the chief's house on the first day, followed by the "Kakkat" festivities on the second day. Participants of all ages dress in vibrant costumes adorned with feathered headgear, dancing joyously to the rhythmic beats of long oval-shaped drums.

Festivals in Meghalaya offer significant socio-cultural benefits to both tourists and host communities. These events offer tourists a unique chance to deeply engage with the region's vibrant cultural heritage and traditions. By participating in festivals like the Wangala Festival or the Nongkrem Dance Festival visitors can acquire a profound insight into and admiration for the local customs, music, dance, and rituals. This cultural immersion fosters a sense of connection and respect between tourists and the local population. For host communities, festivals serve as a platform to showcase and preserve their cultural identity. The influx of tourists during these events boosts local economies through increased spending on accommodation, food, and crafts. Moreover, the heightened visibility of their cultural practices encourages the younger generation to value and continue these traditions, ensuring their longevity. Festivals also promote community cohesion and pride as residents come together to celebrate and share their heritage with the world. In essence, festivals in Meghalaya create a mutually beneficial exchange, enriching the cultural experiences of tourists while empowering and sustaining the cultural vitality of host communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Here are some recommendations for leveraging festivals to attract tourists to Meghalaya:

Promote Indigenous Festivals:

- Highlight unique festivals like Wangala, Nongkrem Dance Festival, and Shad Suk Mynsiem.
- Use social media and digital marketing to showcase traditional dances, music, and rituals.

Develop Festival Packages:

- Create all-inclusive travel packages that cover accommodation, guided tours, and festival participation.
- Offer early bird discounts and group deals to attract more visitors.

Enhance Festival Infrastructure:

- Ensure sufficient infrastructure such as accommodation, transport, and sanitation facilities.
- Set up information kiosks and signage for tourists.

Collaborate with Local Communities:

- Involve local communities in the organization and implementation of festivals.
- Provide training to locals in hospitality and tour guiding to improve visitor experience.

Organize Pre- and Post-Festival Activities:

- Plan activities like craft workshops, culinary experiences, and cultural tours around festival dates.
- Encourage longer stays by offering multi-day itineraries.

Leverage Social Media and Influencers:

- Partner with travel bloggers, influencers, and social media platforms to promote festivals.
- Use hashtags and online contests to increase visibility and engagement.

Cultural Exchange Programs:

- Facilitate cultural exchange programs that invite international artists and performers.
- Promote cultural fusion events to attract a diverse audience.

Focus on Sustainable Tourism:

- Implement eco-friendly practices during festivals to promote sustainability.
- Inform tourists about the significance of conserving local culture and the environment.

Collaborate with Tourism Boards and Agencies:

- Work with national and regional tourism boards for better promotion and funding.
- Participate in travel fairs and exhibitions to showcase Meghalaya's festivals.

Improve Accessibility:

- Enhance transportation options to and from festival locations.
- Provide detailed travel guides and maps for tourists.

Introduce Festival Merchandise:

- Offer unique, festival-themed souvenirs and merchandise.
- Set up stalls where local artisans can sell their crafts.

Create a Festival Calendar:

- Develop and widely distribute a comprehensive festival calendar.
- Ensure the calendar is available online and in major travel agencies.

Use Multimedia for Promotion:

- Produce high-quality videos and documentaries about the festivals.
- Broadcast these on television, online platforms, and during travel expos.

By focusing on these areas, Meghalaya can enhance its appeal as a cultural tourism destination through its vibrant festivals.

CONCLUSION:

Meghalaya, endowed with abundant untapped tourism resources and a vibrant indigenous cultural heritage, is increasingly attracting interest from both domestic and international markets. This emerging trend is proving to be a significant advantage for the tourism industry in Meghalaya. Key stakeholders believe that by effectively marketing and strategically positioning festivals and events, this sector has the potential to become the primary attraction for tourists, positioning Meghalaya as a leading cultural tourism destination.

However, it is essential for organizers to exercise caution. Cultural festivals should not be commodified; instead, they must be preserved in their pure and authentic form, as they have been handed down through generations. Despite the tourism boom, maintaining the authenticity of these cultural festivals is crucial to retain their true essence and heritage. Additionally, traditional festivals should be distinguished from other events to ensure that the unique cultural identity of Meghalaya is celebrated and preserved.

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