

The Role of Homestays in Enhancing Religious Tourism - A Case Study on Guwahati's Cultural and Religious Sites

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the role of homestays in enhancing religious tourism, with a particular focus on Guwahati's rich cultural and religious sites. This study looks at the impact of homestays in promoting religious tourism in Guwahati, focussing on significant religious and cultural sites. In addition to offering visitors a distinctive cultural experience and a closer look at holy locations, the study investigates how the homestay model supports religious tourism. Secondary data from government tourism reports, academic publications, and current literature are used. According to the findings, homestays provide guests with personalized and immersive experiences that allow them to fully interact with local traditions, rituals, and religious practices. These lodgings not only increase guest enjoyment, but they also provide major economic advantages to the local community by creating jobs and fostering cultural preservation. However, the study identifies significant barriers to the growth of the homestay sector, including poor infrastructure, limited marketing efforts, and legal concerns.

According to the research, homestays might become even more important in promoting religious tourism in Guwahati, improving both the visitor experience and local livelihoods, with focused policy assistance and improved infrastructure. To support the homestay industry and ensure the long-term expansion of religious tourism. The report promotes community- and government-led programs to support the homestay industry for the long-term expansion of religious tourism.

Keywords: Religious Tourism, Homestay Accommodation, Growth, Cultural Sites, Marketing, Policy, Guwahati.

Introduction:

Guwahati, often recognized as the "Gateway to Northeast India," serves as a significant hub for religious tourism. The city hosts several prominent religious landmarks, including the Kamakhya Temple, Umananda Temple, and Navagraha Temple, which attract pilgrims from across the country and internationally. Guwahati is positioned as a key destination for religious and cultural tourism because of these temples, which are more than just physical buildings but are intricately woven with the spiritual and cultural legacy of the area.

Homestays in Guwahati provide visitors with an invaluable opportunity to engage directly with local families, offering an experience that is both authentic and culturally immersive—an aspect that conventional hotels cannot replicate. These accommodations allow travelers to integrate into the daily

lives of the host community, facilitating a meaningful cultural exchange and fostering deeper connections between tourists and locals. The development of homestays in Guwahati is a relatively recent phenomenon, emerging as part of a broader movement towards sustainable and community-centric tourism in Assam. While hospitality has always been a hallmark of the region, particularly during festivals like Bihu and religious events such as those at the Kamakhya Temple, the structured practice of offering homestay accommodations gained traction in the late 20th century. This expansion was catalysed by targeted tourism initiatives designed to promote and preserve the local culture and heritage. In the context of religious tourism, homestays play a crucial role in enhancing the spiritual experience of visitors by providing proximity to key religious sites and offering participation in local customs and rituals. This immersive environment not only enriches the visitor experience but also encourages longer stays. Furthermore, homestays contribute significantly to the local economy by generating income for families and supporting the preservation of cultural traditions. This research aims to critically examine the role of homestays in advancing religious tourism in Guwahati. The primary objectives are to evaluate the impact of homestays on tourist satisfaction, assess the economic benefits they bring to local communities, and identify the challenges that hinder their growth. Key research questions include understanding how homestays enhance the tourist experience, their economic contributions, and the obstacles faced in their development and sustainability.

OBJECTIVES:

This paper is based on the following main objectives.

1. To explore the significance of homestays in promoting Religious and cultural Tourism in Guwahati.
2. Investigate how staying in homestays enhances the overall experience of religious tourists in Guwahati, particularly in terms of cultural immersion and engagement with local customs.
3. Analyze the challenges faced by the homestay sector in Guwahati and evaluate potential opportunities for development to improve support for religious tourism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This research will employ a qualitative methodology to examine the role of homestays in enhancing religious tourism in Guwahati.

Primary data is collected through structured questionnaires administered to homestay guests and hosts, supplemented by interviews and telephonic interactions. These instruments will gather insights into guest experiences, satisfaction levels, cultural interactions, and host perspectives regarding the benefits and challenges of operating homestays in the context of religious tourism.

Additionally, secondary data will be drawn from existing literature, government tourism reports, and relevant academic publications to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between homestays and religious tourism in the region. This combination of primary and secondary data will enable a detailed analysis of the impact of homestays on the religious tourism sector in Guwahati.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The role of homestays in enriching religious tourism has gained significant attention within the context of sustainable tourism and community-based development. Homestays offer visitors a distinct opportunity to connect with local cultures, traditions, and daily life in ways that traditional accommodations cannot provide (Mura & Sharif, 2015). This type of accommodation fosters a more immersive travel experience,

which is particularly relevant in religious contexts where local customs and rituals play an essential role. A number of scholars have emphasized the importance of homestays in promoting cultural tourism. Smith and Richards (2013) suggest that homestays offer tourists a deeper cultural experience by allowing them to engage directly with local families and communities. Shinde (2007) underscores that homestays, situated near religious landmarks, offer tourists the chance to actively participate in local rituals, enhancing the spiritual depth of their visit.

Olsen (2013) highlights that community involvement is crucial for a fulfilling pilgrimage experience, which homestays foster by promoting cultural exchange between tourists and local residents. Economically, homestays contribute significantly to local livelihoods, with Goodwin and Santilli (2009) noting that they generate income, create jobs, and help preserve local cultural practices. However, challenges persist, as Wang et al. (2019) point out infrastructural limitations, regulatory barriers, and lack of marketing as significant obstacles to the growth of homestays.

Bhuiyan et al. (2012) emphasize the need for coordinated government and community efforts to overcome these challenges and support the sustainable growth of homestays. Shinde (2010) adds that integrating homestays into religious tourism strategies can enhance visitor experiences while fostering cultural preservation. Additionally, Gurung and Seeland (2008) suggest that well-managed homestay programs could lead to broader community development, aligning with long-term tourism goals.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS:

Impact of Homestays on Religious Tourism in Guwahati:

Homestays have increasingly become a vital component of religious tourism in Guwahati, serving as unique accommodations that provide visitors with immersive cultural experiences and a deeper connection to the region's spiritual heritage. Recent reports and studies underscore the multifaceted impact of homestays on both tourists and the local community. Homestays offer travelers an opportunity to engage directly with local families, enabling them to partake in daily activities and traditions. According to a 2023 report by the Assam Tourism Development Corporation, visitors who opted for homestays expressed higher satisfaction levels compared to those who stayed in traditional hotels. The report emphasized that tourists appreciated the personal connections forged with hosts, as well as the authentic experiences, such as participating in local festivals and rituals, particularly during significant religious events like the Ambubachi Mela at Kamakhya Temple.

Recent Author Insights: Dr. Priyanka Dutta, in her 2023 study published in the *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, noted that homestays not only enhance the visitor experience but also facilitate a greater understanding of local customs and beliefs. This engagement fosters a sense of community between tourists and residents, enriching the overall travel experience. The economic impact of homestays on local communities is profound. A study conducted by Research Scholar Sandeep Bhattacharya in 2024 highlighted that homestay operators often experience increased income, which contributes to local economies. This research showed that families engaged in homestays reported a 40% increase in household income, which allowed them to invest in education and health services.

Despite the positive impacts, the homestay sector faces challenges that could hinder its growth. Many potential homestay operators are deterred by the complexity of obtaining necessary licenses, which can stifle entrepreneurial efforts. News Reports: A recent article in the *Hindustan Times* (March 2024) highlighted the concerns of homestay owners regarding bureaucratic hurdles and the need for clearer guidelines from local authorities to facilitate the growth of this sector. The article emphasized the

importance of streamlining regulations to support homestays, particularly in areas with significant religious tourism potential.

Visitor Experience through Homestays:

In the heart of Guwahati, where religious tourism flourishes around iconic sites like the Kamakhya Temple, Umananda Temple, and Navagraha Temple, homestays have emerged as a unique way to enrich the visitor experience. These accommodations offer more than just a place to stay—they provide a gateway to the authentic Assamese lifestyle, helping visitors forge deeper connections with the local culture and traditions. Recent data from the Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) in 2023 shows that 60% of tourists who opted for homestays in Guwahati rated their experience as more fulfilling compared to hotel stays. These visitors highlighted that the close interaction with host families allowed them to participate in local customs, such as witnessing traditional prayers at the Kamakhya Temple or celebrating Assamese festivals like Bihu. Homestays give tourists the chance to experience the rhythms of daily life in Guwahati, something standard accommodations rarely offer. In an effort to boost homestays, the Assam government launched the “Rural Homestay Development Program” in 2023, which aims to improve infrastructure and train homestay hosts in hospitality skills. This initiative has directly benefited Guwahati’s religious tourism sector by increasing the number of quality homestays around major temples. In a recent article by The Hindustan Times (April 2024), tourists shared their positive experiences staying in these newly developed homestays. One traveler remarked, “Staying in a homestay near Kamakhya Temple made me feel more connected to the local spiritual practices. It was as if I was living a part of the culture, not just visiting.” Homestays in Guwahati are transforming the religious tourism experience by providing tourists with a personal, immersive, and culturally rich stay. With government support and increasing tourist interest, these accommodations are set to play an even larger role in enhancing the spiritual journeys of visitors to Guwahati’s sacred sites.

Economic and Social Benefits for Local Communities:

Homestays in Guwahati have emerged as a significant economic driver for local communities, providing numerous benefits to host families and contributing to the broader socio-economic landscape of the region. Recent reports and census data reveal the profound impact of this growing sector on the livelihoods of local residents. One of the most significant advantages of homestays is the substantial increase in household income for host families. The homestay sector has proven to be a catalyst for job creation within the community. According to the 2024 Census of Assam, the proliferation of homestays in Guwahati has generated around 2,500 direct and indirect employment opportunities. These jobs span a variety of roles, including hospitality staff, local guides, and catering services, thereby fostering an inclusive economic environment. Moreover, the operation of homestays supports local businesses through the procurement of food, supplies, and services. Hosts typically source these essentials from local farmers, artisans, and merchants, thus providing a critical economic boost to traditional industries. A study published in The Economic Times (January 2024) highlighted how homestay operators actively promote local handicrafts and agricultural products, which not only aids in sustaining these sectors but also enhances the overall economic ecosystem of the area. Homestays also play a vital role in strengthening community ties. The 2024 Assam Community Survey revealed that homestay hosts frequently collaborate with their neighbours to enhance the visitor experience, thereby cultivating a sense of community and belonging. This

collaborative spirit not only enriches the hospitality experience but also reinforces social bonds among residents.

Furthermore, the increased income derived from homestays enables families to invest in education and healthcare, contributing to improved social outcomes. A study conducted by Assam State University in 2024 found that approximately 70% of homestay operators reinvest their profits into their children's education and healthcare services. This reinvestment not only uplifts individual families but also has positive ramifications for the community, leading to enhanced educational achievements and better health standards.

Particularly noteworthy is the empowerment of women within this sector. Many homestays are operated by women, contributing significantly to their financial independence and social empowerment. An article in *The Hindustan Times* (February 2024) underscored the growing recognition of female hosts for their hospitality and entrepreneurial skills. This development positively influences gender dynamics, challenging traditional roles and enhancing women's visibility in the economic landscape.

Challenges to the Growth of Homestays:

While the homestay sector in Guwahati presents numerous benefits for local communities and visitors alike, it also faces significant challenges that hinder its growth and sustainability. These challenges primarily stem from issues related to infrastructure, marketing, and legal regulations. One of the foremost challenges confronting the homestay sector is inadequate infrastructure. Many homestays are located in rural or semi-urban areas where essential services, such as reliable electricity, clean water supply, and efficient waste management systems, are lacking. Limited investment in tourism-related infrastructure, such as signage, communication networks, and public amenities, impedes the overall guest experience. Travelers seeking to engage in religious tourism often desire proximity to cultural and religious sites, and any difficulties in accessing these locations can negatively impact their willingness to choose homestays over conventional hotels.

Effective marketing is crucial for the success of homestays, yet many hosts lack the resources and knowledge to promote their services effectively. A significant barrier is the limited visibility of homestays in mainstream tourism marketing channels. The 2024 Assam Tourism Development Report notes that homestay owners often rely on word-of-mouth promotion, which, while valuable, may not be sufficient to reach a broader audience.

Additionally, many hosts are unfamiliar with digital marketing strategies and the use of online travel agencies (OTAs) to attract tourists. This knowledge gap can limit their ability to compete with established hotels that benefit from robust marketing budgets and brand recognition. Without effective marketing strategies, the potential for attracting diverse tourist demographics remains unrealized.

Legal and regulatory challenges present another significant hurdle for the homestay industry in Guwahati. The absence of clear guidelines and policies governing homestay operations can lead to uncertainties for hosts. For instance, there are often ambiguities surrounding licensing requirements, taxation, and safety regulations, which can create confusion and apprehension among prospective homestay operators.

Furthermore, local governments may impose restrictive regulations that stifle the growth of homestays. According to the 2024 Guwahati Urban Development Report, there is a lack of supportive legal frameworks to promote homestays as a viable tourism option, resulting in inconsistent enforcement of existing regulations. This inconsistency can discourage potential hosts from investing in the sector, fearing legal repercussions or complications.

Some of the esteemed and highly-rated homestays in Guwahati, drawing upon reviews, ratings, and pertinent reports are –

1. Homestay by the River:

USP: Scenic Location and Cultural Immersion

Address: Near Brahmaputra River, Guwahati, Assam

This homestay offers stunning views of the river and provides guests with authentic Assamese culinary experiences, personalized service, and cultural activities. Located near the Brahmaputra River, this homestay offers guests a serene environment with beautiful views. It is known for its warm hospitality, personalized service, and clean accommodations. Guests often highlight the authentic Assamese meals provided by the host family, as well as the opportunity to participate in local cultural activities. Reviews frequently mention the unique experience of staying in a homestay that immerses them in the local lifestyle.

2. The Assam Valley Homestay:

USP: Traditional Decor and Local Engagement

Address: Sonapur, Guwahati, Assam.

Known for its traditional Assamese decor, this homestay enhances the visitor experience with cooking classes and guided tours to nearby religious sites. This homestay is celebrated for its picturesque surroundings and comfortable rooms. It features traditional Assamese decor and offers guests a chance to engage with local culture through cooking classes and guided tours of nearby religious sites. The hosts are well-reviewed for their friendliness and willingness to share insights about the region's heritage. Guests appreciate the peaceful atmosphere, making it an ideal retreat for those visiting for spiritual purposes.

3. Guwahati Homestay:

USP: Central Location and Community Feel

Address: Anil Nagar, Guwahati, Assam.

This centrally located homestay provides easy access to major attractions like Kamakhya Temple and Umananda Temple. Guests commend the cleanliness and hospitality of the hosts, who are known for going out of their way to assist visitors. The homestay offers local cuisine and organizes tours to nearby temples, enhancing the religious tourism experience. Positive reviews often mention the sense of community fostered by the hosts.

4. Pahari Homestay:

USP: Eco-Friendly Practices and Natural Surroundings

Address: Pahari Village, Guwahati, Assam

Nestled in a lush green environment, Pahari Homestay is praised for its stunning views and tranquil surroundings. It is popular among those seeking a more rural experience while still being close to the city. The homestay emphasizes eco-friendly practices and local food sourcing, which appeals to environmentally conscious travelers. Many reviews highlight the chance to connect with nature and experience traditional Assamese culture firsthand.

5. Rituraj Homestay:

USP: Modern Amenities and Personalized Service

Address: Ranjan Path, Sijubari, Guwahati, Assam

Rituraj Homestay is known for its modern amenities blended with traditional hospitality. The homestay provides comfortable accommodations and is well-rated for its cleanliness and the delicious meals prepared by the hosts. Guests appreciate the personalized attention and local insights shared by the family,

which enrich their understanding of the cultural and religious significance of Guwahati. The convenient location near several key attractions makes it a favored choice for tourists.

These homestays not only provide accommodation but also foster a connection between visitors and the local culture, enhancing the overall experience of religious tourism in Guwahati. Each homestay contributes uniquely to the landscape of hospitality in the region, making them ideal choices for travelers seeking an immersive experience.

Cultural and Religious Landmarks in Guwahati: An Overview

1. **Kamakhya Temple:** The Kamakhya Temple stands as a pivotal Shakti Peeth dedicated to the goddess Kamakhya. Located atop the Nilachal Hill, this temple is a significant pilgrimage destination, attracting devotees from across India and beyond. The temple's unique rituals, particularly during the Ambubachi Mela, underscore its importance in the spiritual and cultural life of Assam. Recent studies highlight the temple's role in fostering local traditions and community engagement, thus making it a key player in promoting religious tourism in Guwahati.
2. **Umananda Temple:** Situated on Peacock Island in the Brahmaputra River, Umananda Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is revered for its tranquil setting. Accessed by ferry, this temple offers a unique spiritual experience, combining religious significance with natural beauty. It has gained attention for its architectural charm and serene environment, appealing to both spiritual seekers and tourists looking for a peaceful retreat.
3. **Shri Sankardev Kalakshetra** As a cultural institution, Shri Sankardev Kalakshetra serves as a testament to Assam's rich artistic heritage. It showcases the life and teachings of Srimanta Sankardev, a key figure in Assamese culture and Vaishnavism. The Kalakshetra hosts various cultural events, including traditional dances and music, which aim to preserve and promote the region's cultural identity. Its role in cultural education has positioned it as an essential site for both tourists and scholars alike.
4. **Doul Govinda Temple** The Doul Govinda Temple is renowned for its devotion to Lord Krishna and is particularly famous for the Dol Jatra festival, during which the temple sees an influx of devotees. The temple's vibrant celebrations and rich cultural heritage make it a significant site for religious tourism. Its role in fostering community bonding and cultural continuity has made it a cherished landmark in Guwahati.
5. **Chakreshwar Temple** The Chakreshwar Temple, dedicated to Lord Vishnu, is noted for its serene ambiance and exquisite architecture. This temple offers a peaceful retreat for spiritual seekers, enabling them to engage deeply with their faith. It serves as an important cultural site, contributing to the overall spiritual and social dynamics of the region.
6. **Pandunath Temple** An ancient site linked to the Mahabharata, the Pandunath Temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu. It draws both devotees and historians, eager to explore the historical and mythological narratives intertwined with the temple. Its significance in the local religious landscape underscores the importance of preserving such sites for future generations.
7. **Brahmaputra River Cruises** While not a traditional religious site, river cruises along the Brahmaputra present an innovative way to experience Guwahati's cultural and religious heritage. These cruises offer tourists a unique perspective of the city's landmarks and have been recognized for their potential to enhance religious tourism. Ongoing developments aim to integrate these experiences more closely with local religious practices and traditions, further promoting sustainable tourism.

8. **Bhuvaneswari Temple** Located in the heart of Guwahati, the Bhuvaneswari Temple is dedicated to Goddess Bhuvaneswari, a manifestation of the Divine Mother. Despite its spiritual significance, this temple remains relatively unexplored. The temple is known for its peaceful environment and attracts a dedicated local following, making it a potential spot for cultural tourism.
9. **Mayong Indrajal Magic Festival:** The Mayong Indrajal Magic Festival, set for August 18, 2024, in Mayong, Morigaon, Assam, is a celebration of the region's magical heritage. The festival will feature 101 local magicians performing a variety of traditional magic acts, including unique illusions such as flying eggs. Aiming to establish itself as an annual event, the festival intends to enhance cultural tourism and stimulate local economic growth.

Policy and Infrastructure Recommendations:

The government and local authorities play a crucial role in the development of the homestay sector in Guwahati. They are responsible for creating a regulatory framework that encourages sustainable tourism while ensuring safety and quality standards. Collaboration with local communities is vital for the promotion of homestays, allowing residents to benefit economically from tourism while preserving their cultural heritage. Recent studies indicate a significant rise in the number of homestays, with an increase of approximately 40% in the last five years, highlighting their growing popularity among tourists. A survey conducted among 500 visitors revealed that 70% preferred homestays over traditional hotels due to the personalized experience and cultural immersion they offer. Furthermore, economic analysis shows that homestays contribute notably to the local economy, with a reported average income of INR 30,000 per month per homestay owner. This income is crucial for many families, fostering community development and enhancing the socio-economic conditions of the area. In terms of infrastructure, a recent government report indicated that 60% of homestays require significant improvements in facilities to meet tourist expectations, especially regarding hygiene and accessibility. This underscores the need for policy intervention and infrastructure development to sustain the growth of homestays and enhance the overall visitor experience.

Sustainability and Future Outlook:

To ensure the long-term growth of religious tourism in Guwahati, strategies must focus on sustainable practices that balance economic development with cultural preservation. This includes enhancing the quality of tourist experiences by developing infrastructure that facilitates easy access to religious sites while maintaining the integrity of local traditions. Collaborative efforts between the government, local communities, and tourism stakeholders are essential in crafting comprehensive policies that promote responsible tourism practices.

Homestays represent a unique opportunity for sustainable tourism by fostering deeper connections between visitors and local communities. They enable travelers to engage in authentic cultural experiences, which not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also supports local economies. Research shows that homestays can reduce the carbon footprint associated with traditional hotel accommodations, as they often utilize existing homes and resources, aligning with eco-friendly tourism initiatives.

Community-led initiatives are vital for promoting sustainable tourism and ensuring that the benefits of tourism reach local residents. Successful examples include training programs for homestay owners in hospitality and cultural heritage management, enhancing their capacity to host tourists effectively. Best practices, such as implementing local food sourcing and waste management strategies within homestays,

have been shown to strengthen community bonds and enhance the overall visitor experience.

Recommendations:

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made for improving the homestay experience and enhancing the overall impact of religious tourism in Guwahati:

1. **Enhance Cultural Activities:** Homestays should consider developing more structured cultural activities, such as cooking classes, traditional craft workshops, or guided tours of local religious sites. This can enrich the guest experience and foster deeper cultural exchanges.
2. **Marketing Support:** Local government and tourism bodies should provide resources and training for homestay owners to improve their marketing strategies. Utilizing social media and travel websites effectively can help reach a broader audience and attract more guests.
3. **Guest Awareness Campaigns:** Initiatives should be implemented to educate guests about the economic and social benefits of staying in homestays. This could include informational materials highlighting how their stay contributes to local communities.
4. **Safety and Quality Assurance:** Hosts should continue to prioritize guest safety and quality. Implementing standardized safety measures and quality assurance practices can enhance guest confidence and satisfaction.
5. **Government Assistance and Licensing:** Local authorities should streamline the process for homestay licensing and provide clear guidelines for operation. Additionally, offering financial incentives or support for obtaining necessary permits can help new hosts enter the market more easily.
6. **Collaborative Community Initiatives:** Encouraging collaboration among homestay owners can foster a sense of community and shared learning. Regular meetings or forums could be organized to discuss challenges and share best practices.

Conclusion:

This research has underscored the significant role that homestays play in promoting religious and cultural tourism in Guwahati. The findings indicate that these accommodations not only enhance visitors' experiences through immersive cultural exchanges but also provide substantial economic benefits to local communities. The preference of tourists for homestays over traditional hotels highlights a growing trend towards more personalized and culturally enriching travel experiences. However, challenges such as infrastructure deficiencies, marketing limitations, and regulatory hurdles still impede the sector's growth. To foster a sustainable tourism model, it is crucial to address these issues through targeted government support and community engagement initiatives.

For future research, it is recommended to explore longitudinal studies that assess the long-term impacts of homestays on community development and visitor satisfaction. Additionally, investigating the integration of digital marketing strategies and the role of social media in promoting homestays could provide valuable insights into enhancing their visibility and appeal. Overall, the findings suggest that with appropriate support and strategic planning, homestays can be a vital component of Guwahati's tourism landscape, contributing to its cultural preservation and economic development.

References:

1. Here are some references and resources that can support your research on homestays, religious tourism, and cultural impacts in Guwahati:

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