



Potentialities of rural tourism development: A case study of the rural tourism potentiality of Hajo and Sualkuchi villages of Kamrup District, Assam (India)

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Abstract

Rural tourism is a concept of sustainable development of the rural areas in modern world. It is also important factor for creating different employment avenues in those areas and villages where we can't think about the development of any other industry. Rural tourism helps in creating new jobs avenues, contribution towards the socio-economic development the underdeveloped areas. Nearly 70 per cent of the country's population lives in rural areas where, for the first time since independence, the overall growth rate of population has sharply declined, according to the latest Census (2011, July 15). The Hindu, p-A6. It reveals more than half of the population lives in villages and has immense resources for rural tourism development.

The Hajo and Sualkuchi villages of Kamrup district of Assam has great diversity of rural culture, tradition and religious and natural resources which can make it very attractive tourist destination. Hajo is a religious center of Hinduism, Buddhist and Islam religions that has form the basis of attractions for outsiders. Again Sualkuchi is the nerve centre of Assam's silk namely Pat, Muga and Eri,. This village

has an international repute as a major centre for commercial production of indigenous silk fabrics, especially the Pat and Muga silk. This paper aims at exploring the rural tourism potentiality at the above mentioned villages which can be able to add an incentive to promote local, socio-economic and cultural and other resources of the people and also to find out various constraints and possibilities of tourism development in the study area.

Keywords:

Rural tourism, Prospects, Constraints and possibilities, Hajo and Sualkuchi.

Introduction:

Tourism has been held as one of the fastest growing service industries of 21st century and emerging as one of the potential industries in near future. The third world, though, shares a small slice of this growth but has the tremendous potential to compete with developed countries in the future. In the present world scenario, one of the strongest contributions of tourism could be that it helps transfer of resources from the rich to poor



countries and thereby helps equitable distribution of income (Bezbaruah, 2002). “Rural tourism is a multi-faced activity that takes place in an environment outside heavily urbanized area. It is an industry sector characterized by small scale tourism business, set in areas where land use is dominated by agricultural pursuits, forestry or natural area (Dept. of Tourism, 1994)”. The main aim of the development of rural tourism is that is to provide additional income to the population and thus to improve the living standards and reduce emigration to the urban area. Tourism policies should also be applied to help to raise the standard of living of population in the regions visited and meet their needs. Local people should be linked with tourism activities and participate in an equitable distribution of economic, social and cultural benefits they bring, especially in direct and indirect jobs resulting from them (Muhi, 2009).

Rural tourism concept:

A rural tourism destination can be defined as an area characterized by the natural, cultural, religious that are harmoniously create a unique tourist product. The interest of the tourist for recreation in rural areas has grown since the nineteenth century. It was a reaction to pressure created by increasingly urbanized and industrialized society. The term “rural tourism” has been adopted by the European Commission for tourism as the means to describe and explain all the touristic activities in rural areas and villages (European Commission: Towards Quality Rural Tourism). Rural tourism basically based on lifestyle of the people, art and heritage, religion as well as the other socio-cultural factors.

Rural population of any country generally faces various problems like poverty, low levels of economic activity, less infrastructural development etc. Likewise India with most of the population living in the rural areas can be strength for the development of the rural population. The development of tourism in those areas can help to reduce those problems through the following ways:

- Diversification of the economic activity.
- employment generation through different direct and indirect job opportunities
- Reduce migration towards urban areas
- Improvement of public services for the development of tourism;
- Infrastructural development and improvement.
- Revamping the cultural identities of the rural population.
- protection of natural and man-made environment;

Rural tourism in Assam:

Assam is a pioneer state among the states of the north eastern region in terms of the planning for the development of tourism industry. Tourism was declared as industry in 1992 by the government of Assam to encourage the people for creating requires infrastructure facilities. Like the other potentialities of tourism development, Assam has huge opportunities to develop as a rural tourism destination. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India has already declared Sualkuchi as a rural tourism destination. Tourists appreciate the ethnic variety, the



cultural mosaic and the lifestyle of the people of Assam, which is different from many normal tourist places. This interest will be systematically developed through promotion of rural tourism, so that the tourist gets a different experience and the socio-economic benefits of tourism are spread to the rural areas (Tourism policy of Assam 2008).

The people of the villages of Assam can be an important tourist attraction because of the rich tradition and hospitable nature. Now a day a small segment of urban population is keen to visit the rural areas to understand their livelihood as well as the lifestyle. This special segment is rapidly growing due to the diversion of the interest of the tourist which leads as rural tourism is becoming a prospect to grow.

Sualkuchi: Sualkuchi is one of the most important centers of indigenous Assamese silk industry. This place is also known as the one of the largest villages of the state. This place produces a variety of silk clothes prepared mainly by the traditional handlooms from local *Pat, Muga and Eri*. Located at a distance of about 32 km from Guwahati on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra, this vibrant center engages large number of traditionally skilled males and females in this trait. Sualkuchi is an ideal tourist spot for getting firsthand experience of this flourishing cottage industry and also for shopping silk garments. Moreover, boat-racing competition is also held annually among the locals with fun and fare which is quite attractive for tourist.

Sualkuchi is also said to be the “*Manchester of Assam*”, for its silk industry. The technique of

silk production is an agro based industry that has played an important role in the development of rural economy of Assam. The large scale cultivation of three varieties of worms namely Muga, Pat and Eri. Its bountiful production had brought into existence one of the most prosperous cottage industry of Sualkuchi. There are different tribes in this area, whose main occupation is the rearing Silk worm, mainly the Assamese and Bodo’s people are engaged in this cottage industry. Young people of the village are engaged in business and service sectors. The economic condition of the study area is much better than other villages of Assam. However, in spite of its natural and cultural richness, Sualkuchi has not been able to attract sufficient number of tourist mainly due to lack of proper campaigning and inadequate infrastructure (Bhattacharya, 2004).

Hajo: Another potential spot having a good potential for rural tourism is Hajo, located at a distance of about 32 km from Guwahati, the prime city on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra. Hajo is a unique meeting place of three religions likely Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. The place has a number of temples among which Hayagriva madhav is the most important. Hajo is also well known for Assamese bell metal and brass products prepared by local artisans. The place is popular among the local and domestic tourists. But the absence of any modern tourist facility in this otherwise rich tourist spot acts as a repulsive factor for the growth of tourism (Bhattacharya, 2004). Hajo is famous for its brass metal industry among the few pockets in the state. The centre has 224 brass metal production units, where 367 artisans are involved. The



artisans of the cluster have no alternative to their job, as they have no land for alternative like agriculture.

Tourist attractions of Sualkuchi and Hajo:

1. Cottage industry of Sualkuchi: Sualkuchi is known as one of the world's largest weaving villages where the entire population is engaged in weaving silk fabric. A renowned center of silk production, particularly known for Muga-the golden silk of Assam which is not produced anywhere else in the world (<http://www.assaminfo.com>). This feature may be a unique attraction for the tourist.

2. Brass metal industry of Hajo: Hajo is very famous place for the Brass metal industry. Brass is one of the important cottage industries of Assam, with highest concentration in Hajo. The items of brass are the *kalah* (water pot), *sarai* (a platter or tray mounted on a base), *kahi* (dish), *bati* (bowl), *lota* (water pot with a long neck) and *tal* (cymbals). Gold, silver and copper too have formed part of traditional metal craft in Kamrup (Baishya 1989).

3. Hayagriva Madhava Temple, Hajo: Another attraction of Hajo, the Hayagriva madhava temple is one of the most sacred pilgrimage spots. The temple is dedicated to the Lord Vishnu. This temple also resembles the image of Lord Jagannath temple of Puri in the state of Orissa. This is also another attraction of the temple to attract the pilgrims from different places of the state as well as India. Moreover, this temple is believed as the holy place for both Hinduism and Buddhism and Buddhist monks visits this temple from different places of the state.

4. Powa Mecca, Hajo: Powa Mecca is one of the renowned shrines of the Muslims in Assam. Powa Mecca means one fourth of Mecca. It is said that Powa Mecca was constructed from the soil that was brought from the city of Mecca. It is noted for the tomb of Giasuddin Auliya, who was the pioneer of Islam religion in this part. This mosque was built by Sujauddin Mohammed Shah in 1657 AD, during the reign of the renowned Mughal Emperor, Shahjahan (<http://www.visitnortheast.com>).

5. Cultural attractions of Hajo and Sualkuchi: As Assam has various groups of people with their own social and cultural traditions, many types of fairs and festivals are held in the state. Those fairs and festivals reflect social customs and traditions, besides natural human desire for leisure and merrymaking. As the economy of all the indigenous communities is basically agricultural, most of the fairs and festivals held in the state are intimately connected with agriculture. Like the other places of Assam, Hajo and Sualkuchi villages also very rich in its cultural attraction. The major factors of culture that can be an attraction may be as follows:

(a) Fairs and festivals: Bihu is one of the most important festivals celebrated mainly in the Brahmaputra Valley. There are three Bihu festivals, associated with the crop cycle of the Brahmaputra Valley. Bohag Bihu is celebrated in spring-time (mid April), when agricultural fields are about to get prepared for the cultivation of paddy, the major crop of the region. Kati Bihu is celebrated in autumn, when the paddy plants become full-grown and



begin to show the signs of bearing grains. This Bihu is held to propitiate God for bringing welfare to the standing crops. The Magh Bihu is the post-harvest festival observed in mid-January.

(b) Cuisines: The food habit of the people of Assam reflects its culture and traditions to an extent. The cuisines of Assam have its own style and pattern is quite distinct from the rest of the country as well as the other northeastern states. The traditional food of Assam is a blend of many exotic herbs, spices and other medicinal condiments.

Assamese meal comprises of many vegetarian and non-vegetarian items which is quite distinct from the other states. Non-vegetarian items dominate the vegetarian items as Assamese people prefer it more. Major items are steamed rice with *Khar anja* (a dish made of raw papaya), a variety of *Pitikas* (mashed potatoes, brinjal or tomatoes), Tenga - a type of sour curry (which may be fish tenga or simple vegetable tengas) along with kahudi, kharoli and khorisa (bamboo shoots). Among the non vegetarian items that form a part of the Assamese cuisine, the favorites are chicken, pigeon, duck and fish - the most popular varieties being Rohu, Hilsa, Puthi and Chital. Hukoti, a dish made of small dried fish, is also a hot favorite among the native people of Assam. Pork and beef dishes are favorites among some tribes in Assam (<http://www.bharatonline.com>).

(c) Dance and Music: Assam is a home to a number of indigenous tribes with various ethnic fairs and festivals, dance forms that can be seen in the different corners of Assam. The

different dance forms of Assam can be categorized into classical dances and folk dances. Major dances are Bhaona, Oja Pali, Satriya Nritya, Bihu Dance etc.

Problem Analysis:

From the above analysis it has been seen that both the places has a great potentiality for generating income and employment opportunities through but due to some problems these places are not well known as a tourist destination. The main that are identified as

- Lack of awareness of the local people about the tourism and its benefits.
- Lack of tourism based infrastructure,
- Lack of proper plan to develop the places
- Absence of entrepreneurship ability,
- Lack of a proper tourism development policy of the Government
- Lack of people's co-operation and consciousness,
- Lack of proper friendly investment atmosphere
- Absence of congenial atmosphere to attract the tourists.

Suggestion:

- 1) Local people participation should be encouraged for the development of the study area will boost tourism potentialities in it.
- 2) Infrastructure facilities like accommodation, transportation and other tourist facilities should be promoted in the study area.
- 3) It is necessary to preserve and protect the cultural and pilgrimage tourist resources in its original form.



- 4) In the study area Eco- resorts made up of the local material may be set up.
- 5) For the beautification of the study area, it is necessary to create some gardens, parks or emphasis should given on overall maintenance of the study area
- 6) Assure the policy by the governments for preparing some well-educated Tourist guide in the state.
- 7) For the promotion of Tourism sector in this area state tourism department should adopt comprehensive action plan. (They should advertise in newspaper and magazines about the resources of the area. Assam tourism department can introduce a particular website for full information of the study area.)
- 8) To attract more tourist flow in the study area, Assam Tourism Department should organize different fairs and festivals, as a part of their publicity programs.
- 9) Last but not the least; the new generation of Sualkuchi should make a cordial relationship with the art itself.
- 10) Government as well as the Archeology department should maintain and preserve the monuments of Hajo for sustainability.

Conclusion:

The study described here was limited only to two places. However the results are significance and can offer important points of consideration for all places with many potentialities. There are several scopes by which this study could be improved in its next iteration. The tourism scene in Assam is at a very poor stage lacking in planning, co-ordination, proper direction and political will. Planning for tourism for attracting people with higher education and professional skills are still

lacking in the state. Tourism is highly specialized industry and needs people who are fully committed to it and knowledgeable about its various component and sense of professionalism. So, it is necessary to give primary focus in the planning of tourism for the overall development of the state.

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