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Tea tourism, the way forward to promote agritourism in the state of Assam: prospects and challenges

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Abstract

Assam is a diverse state with a lot of tourism potential. It is filled with deep Wildlife, Cultural Heritages & monuments, and various other natural flora and fauna. However, Assam as a tourist destination somehow has not been able to mark its presence on the global tourism map so far. Though the government has recently adopted various steps to rejuvenate the tourism of the state, however, one major sector it has disregarded is the potentiality of Agritourism. Agritourism is a by product of Community-Based Tourism, where the tourists can get first-hand experience by involving themselves with the host community. While there are various community-based tourism products, Agritourism focuses on the agricultural aspect of the host community.

This study focuses on the Tea sector of the agricultural aspects of the state. Tea in Assam is one of the major contributors to its economy and employment. With more than 800 major Tea estates, Assam has the highest potential to develop itself as a Tea Tourism destination in the nation. To take a little inspiration from, we may look at the European countries, especially France and Italy, where they have turned their vineyards into major tourist destinations. The tea gardens of Assam have too many things to offer to the tourists. Starting from the hundred-year-old Bungalows, and lush green lawns to the highly spread beautiful tea plants, these gardens can revamp the tourism scenario of Assam if properly planned and executed.

This study hence will try to focus on the potentiality of tea tourism in the state and will discuss various approaches that could uplift the same. It will also discuss the challenges that tea tourism is currently facing and list out few solutions to eliminate those challenges. As Tea tourism is a byproduct of community-based tourism and Agritourism, it has all the potential not only to develop the tourism of the state but also the host community of the place.

Keywords: Tea tourism, agritourism, community-based tourism, host community

Introduction

Tea Tourism is a coetaneous segment of tourism which is yet to be developed in the state of Assam as a full-fledged tourism sector and has tremendous possibility of the same. Tea tourism is a form of Agritourism, which is again a form of various community-based tourism. Community-based tourism can be defined as a type of tourism that emphasises the development of local communities. These communities open their homes to visitors and provide local experiences that allow the tourists to immerse themselves in local life, creating a cultural exchange and the opportunity to learn different traditions (Caruana, B. 2021) ^[5].

Agritourism, however, focuses only on the agricultural segment of community-based tourism. Here, the tourist may get him or herself into various agricultural elements, such as visiting the paddy fields, helping the locals in the harvesting process, etc. The perfect example of such Agritourism would be Enotourism or Vinitourism, where the tourist may visit various wineries, taste wines, vineyard walks, or even take an active part in the harvesting process. Enotourism is already a popular tourism segment in countries like France and Italy.

Assam, being the largest producer of tea in the country has the highest amount of potential to develop itself as a tea-based agritourism place. This tea-based agritourism is known as Tea Tourism and here in this study, we shall be focusing on its potential to develop the state as a potential tea tourism market.

Literature Review

Tea tourism is defined by Jolliffe (2007) ^[2] as, “tourism that is motivated by an interest in the history, traditions and consumption of tea.”

Zhang (2004) ^[7] indicates that “tea tourism has developed to showcase tea planting areas

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with beautiful natural environment or special historical heritage.”

Ji, S. J. (2006) ^[8] demonstrated that tea tourism in China was developed in the forms of tea museums, tea gardens, tea-related activities, tea shops, tea events, tea folk performances, and tea-related products.

According to Jolliffe and Aslam's (2009) ^[9] research in Sri Lanka, tea tourists had expectations concerning relaxation, homely environments, and tea plantations when visiting a tea destination.

In their survey of tourists in Xingyang, China, Cheng and colleagues (2001) found that tea tourists are mainly tea lovers between the ages of 31 and 40, and tea drinking habits had significant influences on people's attitudes towards tea tourism.

Objective of the Study

- To identify the potential of Assam to become a Tea Tourist destination.
- To discuss the limitations of tea tourism in the state of Assam
- To suggest measures to fix the issues related to tea tourism in Assam

Methodology

This research is done using the explorative and descriptive methodologies and the same would be qualitative. Since this study discusses the potentiality and the challenges of tea tourism in the state, the data collected are secondary.

Tea Tourism: The Prospects and Challenges in Assam

The history of tea in Assam goes back to the early 19th century when Robert Bruce of The East India Company discovered tea leaves in the deep forests of Assam, where the local 'Singfow' tribe used it as a herbal tonic to rejuvenate. It was indeed a great discovery by the Scottish Major as Britain was desperately struggling to break the Chinese monopoly on the world tea market. Tea was a royal drink and the Britishers were heavily dependent on China and could not bear the constant price hikes of the tea leaves, sold by the Chinese traders. And, hence, finding a place where tea leaves can naturally grow was a big achievement and an economic milestone.

Robert Bruce found the tea leaves in 1823 and it took several years from that time for The East India Company to make it in a large commercial way. Though Robert Bruce died soon after in 1824, however, with the help of an Assamese businessman named Maniram Dutta Baruah (Later popularly known as Maniram Dewan), the East India Company began to plant tea in a smaller range as an experiment. After the East India Company took over the region from the 'Ahom' kingdom through the historic 'Yandaboo Treaty' in 1826, within a decade in 1837, they established their first tea garden in Upper Assam. And with this, the story of Assam's exquisite tea gardens started.

Tea Tourism is a contemporary concept in India, and Assam, being the largest producer of tea in the country and with more than 800 tea gardens has the highest potential to bring this concept into a full-grown tourism segment. Tea Tourism is a type of Agritourism, which is again a type of community-based tourism where involvement with the host community is essential. As a byproduct of community-based tourism, Tea Tourism also involves both directly and indirectly with the host community. This process of

involvement of the host community brings the opportunity of economic freedom to each member of the community. When a tourist tries to know and experience the culture of the host society, here in this case the tea tribes and other indigenous people, they do it by imitating what the local people of that society do. This, hence allows the host community to offer various services to the tourist directly and mostly without any third-party involvement, and earn some money in exchange for it. This idea of earning money through community-based tourism, however, is not a new concept and is in a well-developed and progressed stage in many European countries as well as a few Indian states, like Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Assam, as a tourist destination, can really concentrate on its tea gardens to pull the tourists from various places of the country as well as the international tourists. Tea, being one of the largest and oldest industries in the state, has too much potential to offer various services to prospective tourists. Starting from the century-old large Bungalows, and widely spread picturesque tea gardens, to the beautiful cultural aspect of the tea tribes of various tea estates, tea tourism can provide a truly diverse experience to the prospective tourist. Below is a discussion on the prospect of tea tourism products which have the potential to attract tourists from various sources and convert Assam into one of the major tea tourism destinations in the world –

The Picturesque Tea Gardens and the Activities Around Them:

Assam has over 800 major tea estates and more than 60,000 small tea estates spread over 3,00,000 hectares of land filled with well-organized tea plants which look magnificent and truly blissful for the eyes to see. The tourist may have a walk amid the garden enjoying the scenery or may take part with the local tea 'pluckers' to pluck the tea leaves from the plants. Few of the tea gardens of Assam do offer the opportunity for the tourist to get involved with their tea workers and help them in various tea harvesting processes. This gives the tourists a raw sense of experience that they will not be able to get from anywhere else. The tourist may also get the chance to participate in the tea testing process, where the tea manufacturing unit of the company would take them to their testing labs and offer them to test a few samples of the tea that they produced. This again gives a very unique experience to the tourists which the other forms of tourism will not be able to offer. Hence, these touristic approaches may result in giving a unique and once-in-a-lifetime experience to the traveller and also influence others to experience the same, thus generating revenues for both the state and the host community.

The Unparalleled Experience of Tea Tribes and Their Culture:

The tea tribes are the backbone of this industry. Apart from their involvement in tea manufacturing and other technical processes, tea tribes have a huge cultural impact on the tea estates of Assam. They have been a part of Assam's tea industry since the 1860s and gradually have adopted the Assamese culture and mixed the same with their cultures, thus creating a unique way of tradition and culture of their own.

The tea tribes of Assam are very much into their music and dances. The tourist may experience these cultural elements directly by getting involved with the tribe members and also learning their music and dance moves. A lot of tea estates in the upper Assam region offer cultural events for tourists to

experience the tea tribe culture. “Jhumur” is one of the very famous music and dance forms where the traditional tribal members dance and sing to the beat of ‘Dhol’. ‘Manjira’ or ‘Taal’ in Assamese. Getting involved in these kinds of activities gives the tourist a very unique once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The Century Old Bungalows: A visit to a tea garden without staying in a tea bungalow is an experience everyone would regret. These colonial tea bungalows are older than a century and are the face of any tea garden. These luxurious bungalows offer ample amounts of space and are filled with colonial-style furniture and posh lawns. These are the bungalows that give the traveller a sense of luxury amidst the natural beauty. A few of the Bungalows of tea gardens in Assam have already been converted into tea garden resorts and are seeing tourist in-flow from time to time, such as Chameli Memsaab Bungalow of Cinnamora Tea Estate, Kaziranga Golf Resort of Moubandha Tea Estate, Mancotta Heritage Tea Bungalow of Mancotta Tea Estate, etc. These tea bungalows can work as a pulling factor to attract various tourists to the country as bungalows like these are hard to see anywhere else in India.

The Exquisite Golf Courses: What would be a better experience than spending your time in a tea bungalow playing golf and driving through the tea country? Assam has one of the most numbers of golf courses in India and most of them belong to the tea estates. Currently, the state has 21 registered tea golf courses and every one of them is extremely picturesque to look at. This segment of tourism is itself unique and luxurious. Golf gives a sense of luxury and privilege, and the benefit of having golf courses in many of these tea estates gives a vital unique selling point to the tea estates to earn revenues by providing the tourist a unique experience, which is hard to find anywhere in India.

Challenges to Tea Tourism

Though Tea Tourism has the highest potential in the state of Assam, however, it is still struggling to develop as a grown tourism sector. Various reasons are stopping the potentiality to become a reality. Few of the major challenges that the tea tourism is facing in the state are discussed below –

Failing to Recognise its Potential: We must recognise or try to analyse the potentiality of a product that can do good in the market. Though tea tourism as a product has emerged in recent times, however, it has not been in the limelight of tourism promotional strategies for a long time. Both the government and the private bodies are unable to recognise its potential to boost the tourism scenario of the state.

Lack of Government Policies and Initiatives: The state of Assam has recently seen two major tourism policies. One in 2008 and another one in 2017. Both these policies promised to boost tourism in the state by segregating various tourism markets. However, tea tourism did not fall into any of those segments and failed again to recognise it as a potential tourism market of the state. This negligence, however, is changing as more and more private tea estates are providing sightseeing and other services to the tourists to earn revenue and thus, attracting the state tourism board too.

Lack of Infrastructure: The lack of infrastructure is not

only a challenge to tea tourism, but to most of the tourism products of the state. Poor road connectivity, less number of domestic as well as international airports, and limited railway connectivity are the major challenges that the tourism of the state is facing. The poor conditions of connectivity make the tourist uninterested even if the destination is promising to look at.

Lack of Awareness: Lack of awareness regarding such a tourism segment is another challenge. This unawareness exists in both the tourist as well as the host community. The tourist does not even realise that Assam has such an interesting tourism segment to explore. The host community of the state also is not aware of such potentiality and is not able to take advantage of the same. Awareness among the tourists and the host community can revive the tea tourism sector of the state, and generate a good amount of revenue for the state as well as the host community.

Lack of Quality Hotels and Resorts: Though many of the tea estates are equipped with well-organized tea bungalows, however, not all tourists would like to stay in a bungalow. The reason for this may vary from tourist to tourist. However, not having enough good quality hotels or resorts is a problem in almost every tourism segment of Assam. In Assam, only the city of Guwahati has a few HRACC-classified five-star hotels, while the rest of the tourist places in Assam are managed with a few three-star hotels and private & government lodges. Though, with the slow, but steady rise of tourism in Assam, the major towns and cities of the state have seen few good numbers of three and four-star hotels, but when we see the potentiality of tourism in the state, the numbers are not enough.

Recommendations

It's not the barriers or the challenges that stop anyone from achieving its potentiality, but the lack of effort to eliminate those limitations. It is important for every tourism market to understand the challenges that they are facing or will be facing in the future and act strategically towards them. By discussing the above and by knowing the challenges we have come up with several recommendations which could lift tea tourism in the state of Assam.

The recommendations are explained below

1. To overcome the challenges, first, we need to recognise its existence and its potential to become a major tourism segment in the state. The government as well as the private players of tourism has to come up with tea-centric tourism promotional strategies to attract domestic as well as international tourists.
2. The tourism board of the state has to mention tea tourism in their tourism policies and develop designated solutions to strategize and promote tea tourism in Assam.
3. Both the government and other private stakeholders of tourism need to develop their infrastructure, especially when it comes to connectivity. Needless to say, strengthening connectivity is more of a complex process and cannot be done in a short period, however, with the increasing amount of importance given to the various tea tourism sites, the process of upgrading the connectivity will definitely take a faster route.
4. The lack of tourist information centres is another factor

to worry about. As tourist information centre plays a vital role in distributing information among tourist, it becomes very important that the state tourism board establishes these tourist information centres to channel all the information systematically.

5. News and articles in various national and international journals and magazines should be written in favour of tea tourism in Assam. This will enable us to fill the gap between the tourist place and the prospective tourists.
6. Skits, road shows and other promotional performances should also include tea tourism, which would work both directly and indirectly as a promotional tool.
7. As tea tourism is a form of community-based tourism, the member of the host community has to be trained to interact with the tourists and help them to get familiarised with the process.
8. More research on this topic is required to fill the information gap between the tourist and tea tourism places.

Conclusion

Tea tourism can turn out to be a boon for the tourism industry in the state if planned and managed well. This segment of tourism is unique in India and as one of the largest manufacturers of Tea in the world, Assam has the highest potential to become a tea tourism destination. Though tea tourism is still in its initial stage, however, with a dedicated tourism policy and strategic management, this could turn out to be one of the highest revenue-generating tourism products in Assam as well as in India. Tea tourism is a community-based tourism, and hence the members of the host community also get a chance to get involved with the tourism process and earn revenue. Hence, it is understandable that tea tourism can really revamp the tourism sector of the state and bring Assam into the global tourism map. All it needs is strategic planning and an approach to develop tea tourism in the state.

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