

Changing scenario in domestic tourism in northeast india: with special reference to assam

RESEARCH NOTE

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ABSTRACT: *To discuss the changing scenario of the domestic tourism in India's Northeast region, particularly Assam, this research note discovers the growing interest among the domestic tourist from and to Northeast India through the observation and opinion of the tour operators in this region. The study explores the socio-cultural transformation of the attitude of domestic tourists of and towards this region through the reflective discussion that shows the approximate number of domestic tourists from and to Northeast India, destinations frequently chosen by the people and the socio-economic background of the tourists.*

Key word: *Domestic tourism, Northeast India, Assam, Changing scenario*

Introduction

Mark Twain comments, 'Even heaven can be boring after a while' (Sharma, 2006, p.3). Transferring this comment to a reality, tourism has become a popular global leisure activity and one of the largest industries in the world. Domestic tourism is one form of the three forms of tourism, classified by the United Nations in 1994 in its Recommendations on Tourism Statistics that identify those tourists who visit their own country, takes a great place now days in tourism business. Dependency on the international tourism has now shifted to domestic tourism, as domestic tourism market is more stable and growing very fast world over.

Through traveling their own country, the people can feel, taste and learn about their own culture and heritage and understand their own nation. With the increase in income levels and emergence of a powerful middle class, the potential for domestic tourism has grown substantially during the last few years. Domestic tourism plays a vital role in achieving the national objectives of promoting social and cultural cohesion and national integration.

Domestic Tourism and India

Tourism in India has growing substantially. The ministry of tourism's vision is to achieve a level of 760 million domestic tourist visits by the year 2011, the end of the 11th Plan at an annual average growth of 12 per cent. For it, ministry of tourism is planning aggressively promote domestic tourism. However, the growth of domestic tourism is not equal everywhere in the country. It is highly flourishing in certain pockets like Goa, Rajasthan etc while some areas are lagging behind. Northeast India, particularly Assam is lagging far behind in domestic tourism. Prime reasons for it are that air and surface transport links are not good. Also as the area has been politically unstable for security reasons tourist refrain from visiting the area.

Of late, the tourism trend becomes slightly changed in this region. Now, the people of this region showing interest to travel outside and the number of travelers who had visited or want to visit other parts of India for various reasons like medical treatment, study etc is increasing every year. The people from other parts of India are also showing great interest to visit this region recently. This trend of visit from and to this region is growing fast. Therefore, the opportunities are opened for domestic tourism business in this area.

About The Research Note

The objective of this research note is to analyze the changing scenario of the domestic tourism and discuss the growing interest for it among the tourist from and to Northeast India, particularly Assam. This paper particularly deals with the outlooks of persons who are doing business in tourism in this region to analyze the scenario. The socio-cultural transformation of the attitude of domestic tourists is focused in this paper. Non-participant observation of the scenario and open-ended conversations with four important tour operators are the base of this study. The government enterprise, Assam Tourism, Govt. of Assam helps by giving some statistical data. The open-ended conversations with the tour operators reflect the approximate number of domestic tourists from and to Northeast India, particularly Assam; destinations frequently chosen

by the people and the socio-economic background of the travelers. This paper concludes with the outcomes of these discussions, although there are ample scopes to more discussion and detailed studies on this topic.

Changing Scenario in Domestic Tourism in Northeast India with Special Reference to Assam

The scenario of tourism in Northeast India, especially Assam is gradually changed from the last five or four decades. Tourism is now being recognized as a leisure and pleasure activity. In the 1950s, only educated and urban people visit places outside Assam and mainly for educational purpose. Gradually, in this region tourism has gained popularity, as people from rural areas now visit places outside Assam or Northeast for medical, religious purpose etc.

The people from other states of India also are now showing interest to visit Assam and other parts of Northeast India. With development of better communication facilities and infrastructure or especially for changing attitude to this region, now the tourists, prefer northeast tourist spots.

Nevertheless, this is only a common observation. What is the condition of domestic tourism in Northeast, especially Assam, according to the tour operators based on this area? What is their observation? The interaction and conversation with the four important tour operator of this region and based in Guwahati, reveals their outlook and opinion towards domestic tourism in this region. Guwahati is the main city of Assam or even the Northeast that is also the gateway to the country's land locked Northeastern region. In Guwahati, many tour agencies have started operation from past few years who offer services like accommodation booking, ticketing and package tours. I have visited four main tourist agencies based on their importance and brand name, along with the government tourism enterprise: Assam Tourism, Govt. of Assam. The agencies are:

1. Network Travels, Tour Division
2. Landmark Tours and Travels
3. Makemytrip.com
4. SOTC

Governments have different kinds of statistical data about tourism but the real players are the tour operators. So what the tour operators speaks besides the statistics of Government? This is the focused spot of this study and all these tour operators reveal business data and their outlook regarding this issue.

Network Travels

Network Travels, an IATA agency and one of the oldest and biggest travel agency of this region was started in 1992 in Guwahati. They offer everything related to tours, from package tours to booking tickets or accommodation etc. They prepared mostly tailor made packages including all service facilities: accommodation, food, transportation and sight seeing with guide. Network travels offer entire Northeast states including Darjeeling under their package tours. Their specialties in tours are on tribal culture, birding holidays, tea tourism etc. Now, they includes new tourism products like river journey, remembrance holidays (The Remembrance holiday is the tour of remembrance of British rule and period. The Europeans or Americans who were visiting this region in the time of World War II or working in tea, coal or oil industry in British time and want to visit this area once again or their children or grandchildren whose forefathers were working or died in this region, are attracted by this tour) etc.

In previous year, the agency gets nearly 500 foreign tourists and almost 2000 Indian visitors, whereas this year they get almost 2500 Indian visitors and 1000 foreign tourist. Therefore, the rate of tourist visit is increasing almost 10% in every year. The business growth of Network Travels is very good. From last years, it increases almost 20% in turnover. Northeast region is famous for its tribal culture, wildlife, nature and scenic beauty particularly. However, he observed that maximum Indian tourist does not prefer a particular tourism product like nature, tribal life, architecture, wildlife etc. They prefer a mix and match itinerary for their tour, which includes everything special of this region, from hill station to wildlife. Maximum domestic tourist want to visit easy destinations which are easily communicable without any hassles of accommodations, foods etc. Domestic visitors mainly prefer sold and popular destinations: Guwahati, Kaziranga National park and Shillong. The main target tourists of Network Travels in domestic tourism are coming from Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal.

According to the officials of Network Travels, the local people's travel trend has undergone a tremendous change. Earlier the local people were not interested in holiday tours for various reasons like long rail journey, high cost of air travel or simply because of lack of attitude towards travel for pleasure etc. Now, better rail and air communication encouraged the local people to visit places or traveling for pleasure. The rate of travel for touring purpose among the local peoples of this region is increasing almost 10% in every year. The reasons for this are:

- Medical purpose,
- Educational purpose,
- Better and easier Connectivity; So many new trains to new destinations are introduced whereas the cost of air travels is much more low then earlier,

- The better financial condition among local middle class people is another reason. These new urban peoples believe in weekend entertainment and believe in spending, so they accept traveling for leisure and pleasure activity in weekends. Tour is their stress busters and marker of social status.
- Public awareness is increased. So many NGOs, not only work on tourism promotion, but also AIDS prevention, wildlife conservation etc popularize Northeast in other states of India and abroad.
- For job and interview purpose

However, they believe that tour for leisure and recreation or tour for tours is not a part of life among local peoples even now. The local peoples love to visit places with mixing medical or educational purpose. The locals prefer easy destinations to visit like Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Darjeeling, Gangtok, Puri and Bhubaneswar etc. Among the incoming domestic tourists, the backpackers or walking customers are much more visited these areas now, because of good communication, low cost and the most importantly, no restriction in many areas which were restricted earlier for foreigners or even Indians. The next thing of growing domestic crowd in this region is publicity. The Northeast region is the in thing or new fashion in tourism business. They say that people are bored with old destinations and now wanted adventures and new things, which are possible only in NE region. Therefore, Indian crowd, specially Maharashtra, Gujarat and West Bengal's people visit this region much more than earlier.

Network Travels highlighted about two problems in tourism industry in this region. Firstly, the growing trend of mass tourism is affecting the environment negatively. Shillong is a traditional hotspot among domestic tourists, which gradually lost its scenic beauty and calm nature and changed into a nasty and crowded city. However, it exists and receives the highest number of tourists even now only for the strong marketing policy and interest of Indians crowd. Lack of awareness and interest for preserving the nature and culture is the reason of it and he feels that government must make some rules and regulations for visitors and tour operators to preserve and conserve this nature rich region. Secondly, the tour operators of this region are dependent on the ground handling agents or sales agent, based on metros of India for foreign tourists or even domestic tourists and this thing creates uncertainty and less profit in the business. The manager again mentions that the local tour operators are trying to create a base for tourism industry in this area by making brochures, planning new types of products etc. Although this is a slow process, he hopes that it starts to work very soon,

Landmark Tours

The Landmark Tours was started in 2006. This new but important tour company is doing inbound tours and depends maximum on international tourists. However, they are also taking interest in domestic tourists from the last year. Last year they handle almost 350 tourists, among them almost 250 are domestic. The agency gets good response from TTF (Tourism trade fair). Agency observes that the flow of domestic tourists is growing in this region because of the new LTC rules of Indian govt. According to this rule, if the govt. officials take LTC for Northeast, they get airfare that is a great attraction for the Indian people to visit Northeast region.

According to Landmark Tours, now local peoples have also started to tour for leisure and pleasure. They get local tourists who visit Andaman in their package tour. Landmark tours have now realized the potentiality of domestic tourist market of Northeast India. They have started to design packages for tourists who visit different parts of India from Assam or Northeast India. For incoming domestic tourists, he feels that now there is no off-season in this region, as they prefer the popular and sold destinations and mix and match tour programmes. Shillong is summer destination; Kaziranga National Park and Kohima are the winter destination whereas Arunachal Pradesh is all time favorite. Even in Kaziranga National Park, there is no off-season actually, because in off-season even one can take elephant ride outside the park.

They think that developing the destinations and then the right marketing for it is very much important for whole region. The example is the Mawlynnong village nearby Jowai in Meghalaya, which is called as the cleanest village in Asia by Discover India magazine. The information in internet about this village creates a very good market for tourism and makes it as a new tourist destination. However, major bottleneck is the networking with other tour operators of outside Assam. For regular package tours, the tie up with the tour operators of outside Assam is needed which is still not stable precisely because the outbound domestic tourist market is still not stable.

Makemytrip.com, Guwahati

Makemytrip.com comes up with a branch office in Guwahati on the 22 April 2008, following an extensive market survey in Northeast India. From their market survey, they realize that no tour operator in this region offers domestic tour packages regularly or to make hassle free tours for Northeastern peoples. Realizing the great potentiality of domestic tourist market that is rarely touched by any company even now, they enter in the market and have been receiving encouraging response from the very first day.

Makemytrip reveals that they receive customers of every age and class, from businessperson to working peoples to retired persons. For the domestic circuit, people from all income groups, specifically middle to upper middle class are showing great interest. According to the officials, the peoples of this region prefer the places like Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan etc. Interestingly, their maximum customers are from small towns like Nagaon, Digboi, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh etc. In addition, maximum enquiries are coming for domestic circuits and less for international.

They rely on advertisements, especially in print media and through the leaflets for marketing of their products. They get good response from their ads in local paper and free distribution of leaflets with local paper and majority of the customers come in response to these advertisements. Their business growth is very good and they get almost 100% booking for their domestic package tours from the day of starting

SOTC

SOTC is a leading brand of Kuoni Travel Group India, one of the country's largest travel and Tourism Company. The Guwahati office is a Holiday world outlet of their main company. They were selling their tour packages through different sales agents in the city before, but now, the growing market reveal the high potentiality and encouraged them to establish their own outlet in Guwahati on franchise mode. Their market policy is based in niche marketing. He says that the peoples of Marwari and Bengali communities buy maximum packages of the domestic circuit of SOTC. Last year, they get almost 2000 tourists whereas in this year the number is increased to almost 2500. For domestic tours, peoples prefer Goa, Rajasthan, Shimla, Gujarat etc. The domestic packages are tailor made tours and made round the year.

The Concluding Outcomes

The analysis of the study clearly indicate that scenario of domestic tourism in the Northeast India, particularly Assam, has changed. The outcomes from this study are:

- The peoples are now showing great interest to visit Northeast India for leisure and pleasure and the growth of incoming domestic tourist inflow is increasing every year as indicate in the Assam tourism's tourist flow chart.
- The new LTC rules of central govt., removal of the restricted area permit; good communications are the reasons of the increasing number of tourists to this region. The backpackers also visit this region in great numbers.
- Earlier, the local tour companies depend mostly on international incoming tourist, but now they have realized the importance of domestic tourism and have gradually shifted their business to this segment.
- The business growth of every tour operator of this discussion is very good and the number of tourists is increasing every year. So, there are many scopes for other tour operators also who can fill the vacuums of the domestic tourism market's demand and supply
- The domestic tourist now attracts new destinations like Northeast and the Northeast region is in thing in domestic tourism market. New destination like Arunachal Pradesh is on high demand among the domestic tourists and this region becomes all season tourist destination.
- There is an impression that this region is maximum visited by Bengali travelers which is break by Network Travels; they say that the maximum domestic tourist are coming from Maharastra and Gujarat to this region from past few years.
- Earlier, the local tour operators only offer Northeastern tourism destinations under their packages and serve only incoming domestic tourists. Now, the success of Makemytrip.com reveals the fact that packages on other Indian destinations attract local peoples and there is a high potential market for it.
- With the discussion of Makemytrip.com one thing is reveals that now the peoples from small places like Nagaon, Sivsagar, Digboi etc. or even lower income group peoples are showing interest to travel. The local peoples are now showing interest offbeat destination beside the popular ones.
- The tour operators of this region are trying to create a base for tourism industry by making brochure, planning new types of products etc., which make this area as an all season tourist destination. On the other hand, they believe proper marketing for developing new destinations and good & regular connection with the tour operators based on other parts of India is very necessary for the development of domestic tourism in this region.
- The problems of tourism business in this region are that more tourist in the popular destination then its capacity which affect negatively on the environment, dependency on Ground Handling Agents or selling agents, networking with other tour operators of outside Assam etc.
- The tour operators demands for creating some rules and regulations for visitors and service providers by Government to preserve and conserve the natural heritage of this region.

The analysis of this study has cleared a picture about the high potentiality of domestic tourism in this region and the tours operators seem aware of this trend. Because the local operators basically emphasize on the international tourist and there ar e lots of problem for international tourist to visit this area from restricted area permit to unstable political condition to long GHA channel process, tourism industry never growing as a regular and full fledged profit making business in Northeast

India. Now Makemytrip.com have started emphasizing on the domestic tourism which was untouched earlier and their success reveals that to ensure the development of a stable and certain market for tourism in this region and to attract the international crowd, it must emphasize on domestic tourism first.

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