

TOURISM IN RURAL ASSAM AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *Tourism is an activity of an individual or group of individuals which includes travelling and staying in places that are outside of their location for business, vacation and other purposes. In the present day world, economic significance of tourism has increased astonishingly. It is one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world economy. United Nations World Trade Organization (UNWTO) has declared that tourism is a primary source of foreign exchange earnings in 46 out of 50 World's Least Developed Countries (2007). Indian economy is also being contributed by its tourism industry. All the parts including the north east India are characterized by its different kinds of tourist destinations. The present paper gives an account of a very fascinating natural tourist spot 'Chandubi' located in Assam, north East India. Chandubi is a lake with unmatched natural beauty around which the local communities are putting efforts to make tourism a profitable activity for livelihood earning. Chandubi is an excellent example of rural and pro-poor tourism in the state of Assam. People from all parts of India visits the spot throughout the year.*

The prime objective of the paper is to bring out the tourism possibilities and challenges of tourism at the site. Besides, efforts are made to take the benefits and different aspects of community involvement into account as well. The paper is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data are collected from reliable sources like research papers, journals, Govt. websites etc.

Key Words: *Tourism, tourism economics, Tourism at Chandubi, The Chandubi Festival, Assam.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The term 'Tourism' means temporary movement of strangers to an area (Bhatia, 1991). From the historical period man is fascinated about discovering the unseen, knowing the unknown, exploring new and strange places to undergo new and thrilling experiences of adventure. In other words tourism is the outcome of man's craze about adventurism. Tourism is an activity of an individual or group of individuals which includes travelling and staying in places that are outside of their location for business, vacation and other purposes (sung et al. 2012). In modern times, economic significance of tourism is growing astonishingly. It is one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world economy. Tourism is an ever expanding service industry with rapid growth potential and has, therefore evolved as one of the most crucial sectors not only for the developed nations but also for LDCs and the world economy as a whole. The number of domestic and international tourists are steadily increasing day by day and many countries are seeking to make it grow further and further as the influx of tourist through its multifaceted potential benefits may augment economic activities in the nation and thereby strengthen the economic condition of the local economy. Importance is being given to developing the tourism sector equally with the other sectors in an integrated manner that sustains its resources for perpetual use and conserve and does not deteriorate an area's natural and cultural heritage.

Assam is a state with mesmerizing natural beauty and rich ethnic culture. Therefore it is a prime tourist destination in the north eastern region of India. To promote the tourism sector, the state has set up a tourism department as well. With a decent start in 1958, the department has now been able to extend its accommodations to all parts of the state (Bhattacharya, 2004). Now the state of Assam has a vast potential of tourism as it is bestowed with unmatched natural beauty, historic and religious sites that attract people easily. Apart from these spots, there are some other remote places where tourism industry is growing and local people are engaged. Thus tourism also becomes prime way to earn livelihood in these areas. Chandubi, in the district of Kamrup, is one such site. Chandubi is a lake with serene scenic beauty and varied species of flora and fauna. Visitors from different parts of the state and nation come here every year. Thus a mini tourism industry has evolved around the lake. Local people have engaged themselves for livelihood in providing different goods and services to the visitors like boating especially. At least there is one boatman in every family. Thus for the local people at Chandubi, Tourism has become their bread and butter.

2. OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY:

The prime objective of the paper is to bring out the tourism possibilities and challenges of tourism at the site. Besides, efforts are made to take the benefits and different aspects of community involvement into account as well.

The paper is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data are collected from reliable sources like research papers, journals, Govt. websites etc.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Gupta (1987) made an in-depth study on tourism potential in Northern, Western, Central, Southern and Eastern India. It was found that India had been successful considerably in developing its tourism sector after Independence. Efforts were seen in maintaining the well being of cultural, historical and natural tourist destinations.

Mishra et al. (1991) evaluated the significance of tourism vis-à-vis economic development in India in relation to 40 other countries with different types of economies. They concluded tourism as an important economic sector for India and recommended the Govt. to take effective and timely initiatives in order to attract more and more tourists from every part and thereby benefitting the Indian economy.

According to Tony et al. (2002), tourism is one of most important sources of economic prosperity, community development and poverty alleviation in the developing countries of the world. The study was undertaken in South Africa. In the previous few years tourism showed significant growth and affected positively the economic development of the local community in the countries. The study reveals that tourism contributes in economic development, poverty eradication and also helps in correcting income inequality among local community in South Africa.

Gossling (2003) advocates that tourism contributes to the personal economic benefit, encourages improvisation of traditional resource-use system, turns local natural resources to commodities, imparts some negative effects on the local ecosystems and transforms villages into emerging hub of resources allocation. According to Beniston (2003) significant economic benefits on the local communities of mountain environment are generated from tourism.

According to Spencely (2001), there could also be some negative environmental and social effects of tourism on the local community in remote rural set-ups in terms of shock from outsiders. However, the studies have also revealed that the effects are, in generally perceived positively by the local inhabitants.

Wundar (2000) finds that in Ecuador the encounter with the tourists is mostly considered as a beneficial experience by the local stakeholders. Goodwin (2002) also opines that there is desired optimism about tourism in local communities adjacent to national parks in Indonesia and Zimbabwe.

Farooq et al. (2012) finds that tourism has direct positive impact on the livelihood of the people who engage themselves in tourism. The study has been done in Galliyat where, it is found that local people perceives tourism as beneficial to them.

Anup K.C. et al. (2014) in their study of Manaslu conservation area, Nepal, discover that tourism participation helps local people to earn more money and improving their standard of living. The study reveals that socio-economic variables marital status, size of households; education and physical capital have positive effect on tourism.

Thus the available literature advocates that the tourism sector is very important for attaining economic growth and it has emerged as one of the fastest growing and most talked about sector in economic development in the present day world. The studies undertaken in different parts of India and abroad establish a rationale for studying the same in Assam, as the state is regarded as one of the major tourist hubs of India. In the present study Chandubi, a well known tourist spot in the Kmrup District in rural area of Assam is taken for study. In the process the tourism practices, the community involvement and its opportunities and challenges are studied.

4. TOURISM AT CHANDUBI:

Chandubi is one of the most important and famous beels or lakes in Assam. The lake is situated between 91° 24' East and 25° 52' North latitude. The lake which resembles an amoeba in shape has a length of about 7 kilometers and its average width is 1 kilometer with the outer reaches taking various shapes and sizes. Chandubi covers an area of about 2000 hectares including branches between 70 to 150 meters above the sea level and has an average depth of about 3 meters, half of its former depth. Chandubi is blessed with serene sylvan surroundings with ancient hills. Botahi Pahar, Joramukhuriya, Khubdiy, Barduar Reserve Forest lie to the north whereas Rajapara, Sagolsaria pahar, Baroigaon are to the south. There is Muduki to the east and the west flank is covered by Santibeel, Saporakata, Kulsi River and Barduar reserve forest. The lake is an embodiment of serenity and tranquility nestled at the foot of surroundings green hills. It has become famous because of its unmatched natural beauty, myriad flora and fauna, most beautiful birds, algae, fishes, turtle, and their migrated winged mates. Chandubi came into existence as a result of devastating earthquake that occurred on June 12th, 1897. The magnitude of the earthquake was 8.7 on the Richter scale. It is further agreed that the horse shoe lake was in place much before 1897 but the quake sunk the lake bed and gave its present shape and depth.

Tourism industry is growing at Chandubi on the basis of its fascinating natural beauty and wildlife. People from other parts from Assam, other Indian States and abroad also visit to Chandubi throughout the year. But the winter season is regarded as the peak specially, during November-February people are in seen in large number every day. Basically people from other parts of the state come for picnic and academic excursions. Though people have been

visiting Chandubi for years but it is said by the locals that after 2009-10 it has taken a sharp increase. In 2009, an NGO, Wave established an eco-camp there to involve local people in collective conservation and tourism (but effectiveness of this camp is doubtful as reported by the local residents, 'nothing has come out from the camp', reported the villagers). Effectiveness is a different issue, but through this camp Chandubi got some attention from the people across the state. Moreover from 2010-11, by the people of the greater Chandubi area (including neighbouring villages) the famous Chandubi festival has been observed which has ultimately proved to be best publicity shot. From there on, the no. of visitors is increasing rapidly (but no reliable data base is available, drawn from observations and interviews of the local people). Visitors come here to enjoy the heavenly beauty of nature and wildlife. It is a hub of wildlife. More than 250 species of birds, both local and migratory, more than 70 species of fish, 8 species of amphibians, 4 species turtles, and 12 species of serpents are recorded so far. The Sal forest vegetation is painted with large number of epiphytic orchids and climbers. Endangered Hoolock Gibbon, Slow Loris, Indian Sambar, Barking Deer, Wild Elephant are the main wildlife attractions to tourists. People can have a relaxed view of the splendid lake its myriad trees, climbing plants, the hills, the charming and sweet birds etc. Then one can and does opt for a boat trip to crisscross the waterscape. Boats are manned by able-bodied young men from the neighbourhood village Joramukhuria. Wild elephants can accost the tourists sometimes, more than fifty in a herd if one is fortunate enough. Tourists can also visit the joramukhuria waterfall; photograph the flocks of Herons, Wood-ducks so as to make the ephemeral permanent. Tourists have two options for night stay, one is the wave ecocamp at joramukhuria and the other one is Assam tourist lodge at Rajapara. Apart from the lake itself, there are some other notable tourists attracts around Chandubi. These are mentioned in the following-

(i) Kundilmukh: Kundilmukh is located to the east of Chandubi, about 10kms away. The special feature of Kundilmukh is the river Batha suddenly and completely goes underground for some 150 meters and then re-emerges to the surface. The word kundil is derived from Dhudul which means a hollow made into the ground or a mound or dam. Kundilmukh takes on an eerie shape during the rainy season as there develops a huge whirlpool where the water disappears into the ground and takes decomposed woods, bamboos etc. along.

(ii) Bornijora Waterfall: As the name suggests Bornijora is a big stream originating from the Khasi hills. One will have to negotiate ups and downs through the woods on a narrow track if he want visit it. The water of the rivulet takes a plunge from about 30 meters to the ground below making the air full of silvery drops and moisture. Bornijora is an attractive spot for those who love to go for trekking.

(iii) Jhalkat waterfall: This fall is on the course of the Soraikhurung River, another gift of the Khasi hills. Its height is about 20 meters. It is in Meghalaya near the village Rajaghumai lying to the south of Chandubi (8 Kms away). Now, one has to go for trekking to cover 3 kms from Rajapara.

(iv) Ramchandra Ashram: Just off the Mirza-Chandubi road, this ashram is 23 kms away from Mirza. The ashram is amidst greenery of barduar tea estate and at the foot of Jamaguri hill; hence it is also called the Jamaguri ashram. Nagababa Birendrapuri from Jabbalpur in Madhyapradesh established the ashram way back in 1956. He meditated inside a stone cave in this wild and forlorn place and got enlightenment, people believe. There are several statues of gods and animals cast in stone. Popular belief holds it that wishes are granted if one prays to the god here in the ashram.

(v) Kulsi: A well known tourist spot on the bank of Kulsi River. The road to Kulsi leads westward from Satpur on the Mirza-Chandubi road. There is a 7 kms stretch road between Satpur and Kulsi. Kulsi has historical relevance as far as organized forestation and conservation is concerned. Kulsi is the 2nd place in whole Asia to have Teak plantations. British ACF official Alimar had planted teaks here as early as in 1872. There still exist a British era Inspection Bungalow on a hillock amidst teak woods. Ideal place for a picnic as Kulsi offers enough seclusion and bowers crystal clear water.

(vi) Tiyamari: In the route to Kulsi from Satpur one can visit this ancient Saktipeeth. Earliest records of the peeth date back to the middle ages. Autumnal Durga puja is celebrate here in a mixed Hindu and tribal traditional way. Thus, apart from the lake, the above are some of the notable tourist destinations around Chandubi. Tourists visit these places along with the Chandubi picnic spot.

(vii) The Chandubi Festival: The Chandubi Festival is very famous in Assam and outside also. Chandubi Fest was launched in 2010-11 that begins on 1st January every year and ends on 5th January. It is celebrated at Rajapara in association with Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council. The local ethnic communities and people from all around the state participate in the fest. Trading takes place in large scale. People basically sell their home made natural products in the fest but other products are also transacted. Tourist from all parts of the state and the nation also come, visit and

participate in the fest. Tourists mainly become the consumers here. There are many special items that attract people immensely. These are

- Folk Culture (dances, dresses, ornaments, songs etc.).
- Rituals and traditions as predicted by ethnic populace of the area.
- Ethnic culinary delicacies.
- Ideal home of Rabhas.
- Elephant safari.
- Rowing.
- Boating.
- Tongighar ascension

Tourists come in large number to experience these natural and ethnic features. During the festival time i.e. in first week of January the place become like a trade center for the locals. The fest gives a great opportunity for earning some seasonal benefits to the local people. Thus Chandubi has become an attractive tourist spot due its unmatched natural beauty, ethnic cultural traditions and wildlife species.

5. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN TOURISM PRACTICES AT CHANDUBI:

There is a forest village at the Chandubi tourist spot named Joramukhuria, around which tourism practices are centered to. It is situated at the heart of the Chandubi Lake i.e. on the other bank of the lake. The village is small as it only consists of 20 odd families. All the families belong to the Rabha community. The families are engaged in the tourism related works especially boating in the lake. Almost all the families depend upon their boats for livelihood. Apart from boating, they also till their land for production of food crops to meet their own yearly family requirement. But most of the people state that their subsistence agriculture often fails to do so. The households also own livestock like cows, pigs, goats, and poultry etc. but in a very marginal level so that earning from livestock does not count much for them. A very negligible amount comes from livestock to support their livelihood as reported by the people themselves. The Gaonburha of this village is Mr. Jayanta Rabha. While giving an isolate interview, he and other energetic young people like Sanjay Rabha, Baloram rabha and Malen Rabha have provided valuable information about the village and Chandubi area as a whole. The village has a peculiar natural scenic view with forest surroundings. Being a forest village they live amidst the forest resources like invaluable trees, animal species, beautiful birds etc. To reach this village one has to board a boat from the other bank. It only takes about 5 minutes to cross across the lake as it lies in the shortest shape of the lake. And the boatmen are none other than the villagers of this village only. Almost members from all the families work here as boatmen. Their source of livelihood is boating and some other tourism related activities like cleaning the site (as often the people leave there garbage in massive quantity), opening small shops to sell some homemade and natural raw products, guiding tourists and helping them arrange food and lodging etc. They villagers live in very peaceful environment. They are very happy to work for the people visiting the site. There is also the Joramukhuria stream in this village; people also pay a visit to it very often. Thus the local people are engaged and trying to develop the tourism industry at Chandubi. The local people do all the work themselves as far the tourism is concerned. Proper attention and assistance from the state Govt. are necessary. Proper steps to promote and grow the industry can result in greater benefits to the local people and other concerned agencies.

6. CHALLENGES:

The tiny tourism industry at Chandubi is facing many challenges as a result of which the industry is still in its infancy. The basic challenges are –

(i) Lack of Govt. Conservational Measures: Chandubi is a nature's beautiful gift with varied flora and fauna that any country could boast of having it. But from the Govt. of Assam much concern is not seen anywhere. The Govt. does not seem to have any clear policy regarding Chandubi and its tourism industry.

(ii) Lack of Adequate Infrastructural facilities: The site can simply be characterized by its remoteness due to lack of basic infrastructural set up. Firstly, there is no easily accessible road transport. Obviously pitched roads are there but no frequently run bus or cab service is available. Secondly, electricity is also not accessible to everyone, it has been provided only in the last year. Thirdly, mobile networks are not available there which is of utmost importance now a days to connect to the outer world and stay updated.

(iii) Lack of Promotion: The tourism industry at Chandubi is not very famous because inadequate promotion. Planning should be made to promote it to state level, national and international level as well. It can be expected that tourists from all parts of the world will find it to be a worth visiting.

(iv) Man- Animal Conflict: Wild animals like elephants, leopards, monkeys etc. often pay visit to the spot as they can freely move around. In the process they cause damage to the local people by destroying their cultivation, houses and eating their pets.

(v) Lack of other facilities: Some other basic facilities like school, hospital, organized outlets for selling or buying goods and services, restaurants, hotels, lodge, etc.

(vi) Lack of organized market: There is organized market even for the necessary goods and services. This is a big problem for the local residents and the visitors as well. All of them have to face a lot of difficulties due to absence of nearby markets.

(viii) Natural calamity (flood): Every year the area goes under the floods during the rainy season. This is because the lake bed is becoming swallower day by day. So during monsoon flood is very frequent in area areas. Due to flood visitors and local people suffer every year.

7. OPPORTUNITIES:

There is a very good opportunity to avail more benefits from tourism at Chandubi by adopting following steps-

The sector should be enlarged so that more job opportunities for the local people can be created. Steps should be taken to undertake new lucrative projects involving more and more people in the sector. Assistance from the Govt. is a must.

Secondly, the growth of tourism depends upon promotion. The industry requires more promotion and dissemination. Without proper and adequate promotion strategy, tourism sector cannot flourish enough. Collective efforts from the Govt.; travel agencies and local people should be made to make Chandubi a popular national and even international destination as well.

Thirdly, building the necessary infrastructural facilities can boost the growth of the tourism industry. Without an updated infrastructural and provision of basic necessary facilities, this industry will always be in its infancy. Govt. and NGO's should come up with specific plans to build a good infrastructural set up at Chandubi.

The last but not the least step is conservation i.e. conservation of the gifted forest resources of Chandubi. It should be declared as wildlife Sanctuary as soon as possible. Existence of many endemic species like hoolock gibbon, slow Lories, varieties of orchids, hundreds of bird species support evidently demands more conservation than a mere reserved forest area. Conservation of these resources will automatically attract more visitors and thus growth of the tourism activities will be inevitable.

8. CONCLUSION:

Chandubi is a very famous tourist spot and local people of the spot are earning their livelihood and trying their level best to enlarge the mini tourism industry of the site. Though there is a great potential of flourishing the tourism industry but the case has not been so due to existence of multifaceted challenges or growth retarding factors. These problems can only be addressed by the collective effort of the Government and local people. The state Govt. should pay proper attention, and prepare appropriate plan of action to remove the obstacles incorporating the local inhabitants. Only then the huge potential of the tourism industry of Chandubi can be unleashed. Thus Govt. has to play a pivotal role if more benefits have to be availed from it.

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