

Tourism for Manipur: A Viable Alternative for Economic Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Tourism industry, also called the smokeless industry has proven time and again as one of the best options for bringing speedy growth and development in many countries of the world. This industry is also one unique industry which has the capacity to reach out to the poorest of the poor in the society as it involves multiple stakeholders. Manipur, one of the eight North Eastern states of India, having an area of 22,347 sq.kms is still struggling on its path to development, comparing to other well developed states of India. The state is inhabited by more than 32 ethnic groups, has a rich cultural heritage and exotic flora and fauna.

Manipur's Keibul Lamjao National Park is the only natural habitat of the Brow Antlered Deer which have become extinct in other parts of the world. Manipur's scenic beauty lies in its vast tracts of unexplored nature, exotic flowers, lakes, rivers, waterfalls, caves etc. The world famous game of Polo is believed to have its origin in Manipur. Therefore, this paper emphasizes the need to create tourism awareness among the people of the state and tap the enormous potentials Manipur has in bringing this wonderful industry which have brought sunshine to people, villages, towns, districts, states, regions and countries across the world. The problems of unemployment, poverty, rural and urban development, infrastructural development etc. will be so solved if tourism industry flourishes in Manipur.

Hence, bringing tourism awareness to the people of Manipur need to be given top priority so that the state can prosper leaps and bounds without fail in the near future. The methodology of the paper will be exploratory in nature and based on primary and secondary data's and websites.

Key words: Tourism, Sustainability, Manipur,
Development, Local Community.

INTRODUCTION

Manipur, one of the eight North Eastern states of India, having an area of 22,347 sq. kms is still struggling on its path of development comparing to other well developed states of India. The state has gone through decades of underdevelopment and is still struggling with no industries, no private sectors and where government jobs are scarce and very difficult to secure. As such, there are few opportunities of employment and the number of educated unemployed people is also very high. The number of unemployed youths registered in the state employment exchange was 8, 12,811 in 2016 as per records from the Directorate of Labour and Employment (The Week, Feb, 2020). This is a matter of great alarm, as unemployment affects the youths and their families psychologically, financially, emotionally and materially. It brings in a sense of dejection, inferiority and hopelessness among the youths. Due to frustration, anger and disenchantment, youths often succumb to alcoholism, drug addiction, robbery, murder, suicide and sometimes join illegal and immoral activities for easy money.

Decades of arms struggle have also taken its toll and the ongoing ethnic conflicts have made the state go through the hardest phase of economic crisis. For a state where over 70 percent of its population lives in rural areas, inflation is bleeding every family dry, no matter what their ethnic identity may be. (Mitali Mukherjee, September 13, 2024). It's high time both the government and the people should be awakened to make this land once more the land "Where the Gods took to Dancing", which is a popular slogan of the Manipur Tourism Department.

Tourism is recognized as one of the strongest drivers of trade and prosperity and one of the major economic sectors that contributes significantly to national and local economies around the globe by alleviating poverty, creating employment and encouraging investment and trade (Sunildro L.S. Akoijam, 2015). Tourism is considered to be one of the global industries which has a higher growth rate compared to other sectors of economy. Tourism is not only a sector for growing economy but is promoted by a region to balance the inequality of economic development by providing employment. According to WTO, 2013 almost 4.7 million

jobs were created across the world due to tourism activity (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016). The basic purpose of travelling to different countries has converted travel into business and eventually benefitting the host and the country's economy. Tourism impact can be seen in different types varying from country to country. Tourism has 3 major impacts mainly economic, cultural and environmental (Kumar, et al 2015).

In the current context, tourism is an essential element in developing the world economy and is one of the leading sources of revenue for advanced and emerging countries (Costa 2017; Mason 2015). It is therefore a sector of economy that affects the global development of a country. With the introduction of the "New Economic Policy 1991", India opened its door to the South East Asian countries for trade and other socio economic activities. India becomes a sectoral dialogue partner in March, 1993 in the three areas, namely, trade, investment and tourism with ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries and moved towards Southeast Asia to build strong economic, strategic and political ties with these countries. The India's Look East Policy (LEP) started with the aim to enhance economic relations with ASEAN countries accounting for almost 45% of India's foreign trade. The Look East Policy was officially launched in the year 1991 by the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, although the term "Look East Policy" was mentioned for the first time in the Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs, 1995-96. The policy is expected to usher in a new era of development for the North East through network of pipelines, connectivity, communication and trade. Manipur is one of the Northeastern states of India which shares border with these ASEAN countries and is the gateway to Southeast Asian countries under the flagship programme of India's "Look East Policy" (G.P. Prasain & Lalhriatchhungi, 2015).

Manipur depends on primary sector. Industrial infrastructure, unfortunately, does not exist. Each and every public sector undertaking/ industry, be it Manipur Spinning Mills Corporation or Khandsari Sugar Mill or Manipur Cement Ltd. etc., has not been functioning in the state for many decades because of one reason or other, the major one being mismanagement by persons in authority positions. The political and bureaucratic leadership in Manipur have a dependency attitude

and governance to them means implementing central schemes and spending funds only.

One important and promising component in the realm of socio-economic development is tourism industry – a ‘smokeless industry’ which gives quick economic returns. It can generate economic surplus without causing irreparable damage to the environment and conflict to individual and social ethos. Manipur is endowed with those resources which can act as pull factors in tourism industry – rich cultural and traditional heritage, religious spots, temperate climate, moderate rainfall, abundant natural gifts and hospitality and generosity of its people. Social development through tourism should mean more employment, more wealth, more amenities and more education with a proper and systematic arrangement of things into proper place and in the right time. (Oinam Momoton, et al 2015).

OBJECTIVES

1. To bring tourism awareness to the people of Manipur and tap the immense potential it possesses for growth and economic development.
2. To promote human resource development through tourism.
4. To project Manipur state’s immense tourism potentials.
5. To find ways and means for tourism to flourish in Manipur.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the paper will be exploratory in nature and based on primary and secondary datas.

MANIPUR’S TOURISM POTENTIALS

The state of Manipur is blessed with a pleasant climate, rich flora and fauna and a vibrant array of 32 ethnic groups. The Loktak Lake which is the biggest fresh water lake of North East India is situated in Manipur. On the southern shore of the lake is the only floating park in the world – The Keibul Lamjao National Park. This park is the only natural habitat of the Brow Antlered Deer which have become extinct in other parts of the world. Manipur is gifted with countless places of pristine untouched scenic beauty – the waterfalls of Leimaram, the Shirui Lily of the Shirui Hills in Ukhrul district, the Loukoipat Lake of Bishenpur, the adventure sports complex at Lamdan, the Kangkhui caves etc.

Manipur's unique culture and tradition also makes it a land full of colourful fairs and festivals. The state is famous for its 'Ras Lila' which is a dance depicting the legendary love story of Radha – Krishna and the devotion of the Gopis to Lord Krishna. Shri Govindajee Temple is an important venue for these dance performances, particularly on the night of Basanta Purnima and Kartika Purnima (Travelers Companion). The Lai Haraoba festival is another colourful spring festival celebrated during the months of April/May where ritualistic dance for peace and prosperity are performed by the locals and priests and priestesses in front of the temples of the Gods of the forests.

Manipur is also a proud owner of War memorials and cemeteries of the Second World War. Some of the fiercest battles of the War were fought in the soil of Manipur between the British led allied forces against the Japanese and the Indian National Army (INA). Manipur houses two very important War cemeteries, one is the Imphal Indian Army War Cemetery, which is home to the graves of Muslim soldiers of the British Indian Army, as well as Cremation Memorial which marks the cremation of Hindu and Sikh soldiers. The other important cemetery is the Commonwealth War Cemetery which is the home to the graves of Commonwealth soldiers, including Britons, Australians, Canadians, Indians, East and West Africans and Burmese (Eastern Heritage Trails Tours, Imphal).

Moreover, as Manipur is inhabited by more than 32 ethnic groups, handloom and handicraft product are many and unique in their own way. The traditional attires of the Meiteis, Kukis, Nagas, Mizos etc. with their colourful designs and handwork are simply breathtakingly beautiful. The dancing Manipuri doll is also one of a kind which will be a lovely memento for the tourists to take home (Ningthoujam & Elangbam, 2014). Therefore all these factors and potentials are some of the tourism assets which Manipur need to tap and make tourism flourish in the state.

CREATING TOURISM AWARENESS

According to the study of Turner and Friermuth (2016), tourism has become a strong pillar for sustainable development for both developed and emerging economies, as it offers various cultural, social, technological, experiential, and natural products for leisure and business. In this connection, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC 2021) revealed that travel

and tourism plays a vital role in the creation of jobs, both including its direct, indirect and induced impacts; it estimated that in 4 jobs created across the world, i.e., about 334 million or 10.6% of all jobs, accounted for USD 9.2 trillion, 10.4% of global GDP.

Tourism participates in a country's growth and development by bringing in multiple economic values and benefits, and secondly, by helping to build brand value, image and identification to the region. As a significant contributor to economic growth, the tourism industry goes beyond attractive destinations (Khalil et al 2007). It plays a considerable role in boosting the economy of a nation. Tourism has demonstrated its potential for creating jobs and encouraging income generation activity by local communities in destination areas (Ashley, 1995). This industry possesses the capacity to give the benefits even to the poorest of the poor of the society.

Tourism is the ideal catalyst for kick-starting small economies. It is known to have transformed the fortunes of Maldives and Seychelles in less than a decade. Bali, Aruba, Jamaica and the South Pacific islands have also benefitted immensely from tourism. For instance, tourism accounts for half of Jamaica's foreign exchange earnings and about a quarter of its jobs.

In the case of Bhutan, with the growth of tourism, rural people spend money from their earnings on purchasing other goods and services, the other merchants or wholesalers profit from this exchange of money. As a result of renting their rooms or by building apartment blocks, they are in a position to put many straight into their pockets. Goods are purchased in small stores run by local people and food and drinks is consumed in outlets also run by them. So the local people are increasing their spending power and thereby creating a 'multiplier effect'.

In case of urban areas, people build resorts and hotels mainly for tourists. Tourists come and stay in the resorts where the hoteliers are able to earn profit. So the increasing number of tourists requires increase in accommodation in the form of rooms whereby the overall economic impact is positive. (Pawan Kumar Sharma & Achintya Mahapatra, 2012).

Sustainable tourism sectors have been proven to contribute to poverty alleviation through job creation and private investment and by being a catalyst for broad investment like, climate reforms, basic skill development and improved country image. Thailand, Indonesia, Mexico, Morocco,

Tunisia, Mauritius, South Africa, Tanzania, and Cape Verde show how tourism can be a powerful and transformative development tool. The strategy relies on four pillars: policy reforms, capacity building, private sector linkages and product competitiveness. (Th. Umavati Devi & E. Bijoy Kumar Singh, 2015).

Nearer home, the state of Sikkim is one of the best example of how tourism brought prosperity to the state. There has been a tremendous growth rate in both domestic and foreign tourist arrival of 86% and 81% respectively from 2000-2018. It was found that the main reason behind the tremendous growth of tourist inflow in the tiny Himalayan state is due to the best hospitality, its mesmerizing scenic beauty and peaceful nature. Furthermore, the department of tourism and civil aviation has been constant as regular training is given to the local stakeholders in tourism sectors like guides, tour operators, bird watching, trekking etc. (Tamang & Solanki, 2020).

Tourism creates a demand for new hotels, inns, bed and breakfast establishments, restaurants, resorts, bus and taxi services, tourist guides, entertainment services, cottage industries and souvenir shops, and much more, all of which create new jobs. It infuses cash into the local economy. It creates a need for new roads, railways lines and stations, and new or expanded airports. This also generates employment (Kheersana Yumlembam, 2017).

Considering the above stated observations about how the tourism industry could reach out to every section of the society of any nation, the state of Manipur with its potentials of developing a vibrant industry should seriously pursue tourism to grow and develop into a self-sustaining welfare state. Moreover to leverage the burgeoning global travel and trade and in keeping with the India tourism industry's objective of positioning India as a global tourism brand, the Ministry of Tourism under its Incredible India Scheme has strategically outlined in its policy the central principle of, 'Atithi Devo Bhava' (Guest is God). Looking at this statement it's very clear that the Indian Tourism Ministry is determined to ensure that every tourist in India is physically invigorated, mentally rejuvenated, culturally enriched and spiritually elevated.

To meet these objectives and at the core of the National Tourism Policy of 2002, is outlined the seven pillars of tourism, Swagat (Welcome),

Soochana (Information), Suvidha (Facilitation), Suraksha (Safety), Sahyog (Cooperation), Samrachanam (Infrastructure Development) and Safai (Cleanliness) (From Travel and Trade Division, 2020). Therefore safe and honourable tourism is how the government of India wants to move on with its tourism programs to ensure that India becomes a much sought after tourist's paradise.

'Safe and Honourable Tourism' aims to strengthen the critical pillar of Suraksha (Safety) and ensure that Indian tourism follows international standards of safe tourism practices, applicable for both tourists and local residents i.e. local people and communities who may be impacted by tourism in some way. Its central objective is to ensure that tourism activities are undertaken, integrating the need to protect the dignity, safety and the right to freedom from exploitation of all tourists and local residents involved in or impacted by tourism. In today's scenario, following safety guidelines is not just about adhering to the provisions of the seven pillars but also implies good business (Travel Trade Division, 2020).

Very recently, on the 25th of Jan 2022, the Ministry of Tourism celebrated the National Tourism Day by holding a two hour programme on virtual platform. The theme of this year's celebration is Rural and Community Centric Tourism. During the programme, Union Minister of Tourism, G. Kishan Reddy launched the digital booklet of 75 incredible sites to visit in India and Incredible India 2022 digital calendar dedicated to tourism sites in the country. It is noteworthy to mention that he stressed strongly on the promotion of tourism with special focus on North East region and to tap the potentials of the region.

The state of Manipur is also trying to promote homestays since they are being preferred by tourists. In a move to promote COVID-19 hit tourism industry, Manipur is planning to set up eco-tourism facilities at all the 60 assembly constituencies in the state. "The state government has finalised the proposal to set up the eco-tourism facilities having basic amenities," says director W. Ibohal Singh of Manipur tourism department. "The district agencies will implement the said eco-tourism project," he added. The government will provide Rs 30 lakh for installing these facilities in each of the 60 constituencies, while another Rs 20 lakh will come from each MLA's local area development funds (Sobhapati Samom, 2020).

Therefore, following the Ministry guidelines of the country and taking note and facilities to be provided by the state government, there is no reason why tourism cannot succeed in the tiny state of Manipur. The people of Manipur should be given awareness on the latest tourism policies and programs of the country by organising seminars, workshops and interaction programmes with a strong participation by the local people and all stakeholders. People need to be awakened to the opportunities this incredible industry has to offer which will surely bear rich fruits.

SUGGESTIONS AND MEASURES

1. To have a vigilant and safe law and order situation where people, both local and non-locals can feel carefree and secure i.e., an environment where people are free to move around even after sunset as in other parts of the country.
2. The state should be free from the frequent bandhs and blockades. The national highways NH-2 (Imphal Dimapur road), NH-202(Mokokchung in Nagaland via Tuensang, Sampurre, Meluri and Jessami to Imphal), NH-37 (Imphal-Jiribam-Karimganj) need to be given strong focus and developed as tourism need good roads and transport. The highways are still prone to frequent landslides, even the roads in the heart of Imphal city are in deplorable condition.
3. Though the government of Manipur, in its tourism policy of 2011 came up with some dynamic vision like – “Making Manipur a favourite national and international tourist destination by 2020,” so far the policies and programmes have failed to reach out or create desired impact. Therefore tourism awareness programmes must be held with the participation of local communities. Tailor made programmes and workshops by trained personnels among the local community will prove to be highly beneficial.
4. The state government should introduce economic packages so that each household in the community can make arrangement to accommodate at least one or two tourist to stay at their place and get paid for the accommodation and hospitality. The vast economic potential of tourism can be easily tapped by setting up homestays, selling local products like handicraft and handloom.

5. For tourism to bear fruit, local leaders, like the village Pradhan, members of the Panchayats, local women bodies, local clubs and households should come forward and make pathways to welcome tourists in their respective areas.
6. Local people should be allowed to participate in the decision making process. Certification and licensing schemes should be implemented well and readily available to the stakeholders.
7. Tour guides, agents, law enforcing agencies and the media should all play a major role for tourism development in the state.

CONCLUSION

This paper is aimed at reaching out to the people of Manipur living on both hill and valley and create tourism awareness in the entire state. Tourism is one industry which can be easily developed if the government and the common people are ready to join hands and work on it with hope and dedication. Tourism doesn't differentiate people on the ground of being educated, uneducated, rich and poor. In this industry each one of us can contribute in our own respective ways. Hence, making tourism industry flourish and grow in our state is one of the simplest and easiest way to economic self-reliance for the people of Manipur. Thus, the people will be empowered, contented, and peace and prosperity will prevail in the state.

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