



Linking with Southeast Asia Developing Northeast India's Tourism Potential

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The Vision 2020 document released by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2008 for the Northeastern region earmarks infrastructure-led tourism development as one of the primary hopefuls for revenue generation. Although India is touted to be one of the ten top tourist destinations of the world the Northeast plays a negligible role in the overall percentage of tourist arrivals in India, constituting one per cent.

This brief focuses on government initiatives, whether real or rhetorical, and addresses the key challenges for their failure to deliver. A number of problems beset the region which tends to impede progress of any kind. Of these, three are given pride of place, and all other impediments are subsumed within them: Tourism marketing strategies, infrastructure developments and security and administrative issues.

MARKETING & PUBLICITY: UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMATIQUE

This has two aspects-national and international-both of which work within the umbrella of the region's forward and backward linkages. Southeast Asia holds great prospects for the Northeast as a market and vice versa within the ambits of the Indian Look East Policy (LEP) and the Vision 2020 document, which deals with the international facet of tourism promotion. Also, developing backward tourism connectivity with other parts of India is as important an element of strides in tourism as developing links with Southeast Asian countries, which answers to the national aspect. For this reason, it is important to recognize tourism as a promising revenue generator.

Role of tour operators

Publicizing the tourism potential of the Northeast to tour operators at both the national and international levels is crucial because it is they who establish tourist routes and make these available through packages and such to visitors. It becomes practical for tourists to travel on pre-packaged plans and gain permission to travel to different areas through the right channels, instead of going through the rigour of planning personal holidays.

Dissemination of information

In 2008, the NEC (Northeastern Council) formed the North Eastern States Tourism Forum (NEST) with representation from the various states to coordinate intra-state and inter-state tourism plans, such as consolidation of circuits and marketing. Their meetings, as suggested on the DoNER website are to be held every quarter. However, commendable as this exercise is, there is a lack of information in the public sphere about the content of these meetings, and whether they are even taking place, which is rather counter-intuitive. Moreover, there is a whole host of information regarding 'actionable points' and 'actions taken' by the DoNER in its promotion of tourism up on their website which is sadly outdated (the latest dates back to 2008) and cannot be corroborated due to the deficiency in public knowledge of these proceedings.

Audio-visual publicity and its psychological imprint

The audio-visual feature of publicity and its subtle influence on the psychology of the individual through slogans, films, advertisements and so on can hardly be overstated. The Vision 2020

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document mentions a need for the region to 're-brand itself' along these lines; indeed it goes as far as to say that the slogan 'Paradise Unexplored' with regard to the Northeast inspires 'instant recall' in the mind of an alert traveller. This, sadly, is far from the truth.

Although all the Northeastern states have competent tourism websites, which are inevitably the first step in the procurement of information by those interested, they could certainly be more user-friendly. As the first point of contact for a tourist, a government tourism website should have facilities for accommodation, transport arrangements and travel bookings within the state, or provide direct links to other websites that provide such services.

For this, models used in other parts of India could provide an excellent starting point. For instance, the Rajasthan tourism website is available in seven different languages and the Gujarat website in nine, which immediately amplify their reach. In the same manner, offering the Northeastern state tourism websites in Southeast Asian languages would be of assistance in establishing linkages with countries that are in the region's vicinity. This would also play on historical cross-border cultural associations that defy boundaries and bring in an element of nostalgia and personal identification, which is an important trend in heritage tourism, a key aspect of tourism in the Northeast. This diaspora-based activity can also be a catalyst in triggering economic and infrastructural developments in the region, thus contributing towards transforming the Northeast into an engine of growth.

II

OVERCOMING THE PROBLEM OF CONNECTIVITY AND BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE

The budget allocation of FY 2011-12 ought to play a significant role in creating institutional arrangements to provide efficacious ground services at both the government and private sector levels. The most recent Union budget,

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announced in February 2011 by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, has assigned INR 8,000 crore for the development of the Northeastern region in the fiscal year 2011-2012, an almost double of the previous budgetary allocation, and it can be hoped that a section of it will be invested in tourism development and produce tangible results. In addition, the ministry for the development of the Northeastern region (DoNER) has been allocated INR 1550 crore for infrastructure development, which is approximately 12 per cent lower than the previous year's INR 1,760 crore.

However, the problem is not of inadequate funds. There is the perennial problem of funds not reaching their intended recipients, in addition to the worrying gap between the conceptualization and actualization of the tourism policies of the Northeastern states. This section will therefore discuss the tools that can facilitate infrastructure-led tourism development.

Integrated Northeast tourism policy

A combined vision for tourism in the region is arguably the most important element for its successful implementation, indeed, its centrality is even acknowledged in the tourism policies of the Northeastern states.

A recognition of intra-state tourism will enable connectivity and communication links as well as attend to the concern that tourists and tour operators often ignore geographical demarcations in tourism plans and packages. However, this combined vision also has its detractors who believe that it may enhance the 'enclavization' of Assam in joint projects which would favour the state at the expense of other states in the region.

Absence of proper market studies

In 2003, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) commissioned a study to formulate twenty year perspective plans for a phased sustainable tourism programme on the basis of availability of resources, with a different perspective plan for each state. The exercise, however, and its state-wise recommendations seem to have been largely forgotten. Interactions with the recently instated Tourism Minister of Assam, Chandan Brahma, revealed that a market study is in the pipeline, and there are efforts being made for destination and circuit development in the state. Actions that replicate words are the order of the day.

The tourism policies of the Northeastern states by

and large, do not have a targeted tourist niche or market and are quite unfocused in that everything from adventure tourism, to wildlife, tea-garden and World War II nostalgia tourism are jostling to be considered. While all of these sectors hold great potential in the region, it is imperative that the states undertake intelligent analyses of the profile of tourists that visit them and develop niche efficiency in the sector that seems to attract the most amount of interest. To thoughtlessly create supply without fully understanding the demand is unwise.

Investment promotion

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture recently recorded that the Northeast was not 'geared up for tourism'. Various plans for the up-gradation of tourist routes, destinations and accommodation were initiated but have yet to see the light of day. Reports state that domestic investors are agreeable to devoting a collective amount of INR 7000 crore to investments in the region, but are finding land acquisition difficult to negotiate. Again, this can be contextualized within the assorted tourism policies.

The most viable investment model for the Northeast is the Public Private Partnership (PPP) model and efforts in this direction have been well-documented. However, the advancements do not seem coherent, and political imperatives often mean that these projects extend indefinitely beyond their deadline or come to a halt altogether with the vague promise of being revived at some point in the future. For instance, in reference to connectivity, Assam's tourism policy at one point talks about giving the "highest priority to the development of national circuits within the region and provide for linkages to other circuits to be developed." Sikkim's, drafted in 2010, talks about the importance of the Look East Policy and exploiting "fully the opportunities for tourism expansion opened up by the Asian Highway," with "particular attention" given to connecting "the destinations by good all weather road links." However, the lethargic implementation of ambitious plans and the politicking of nations in the Southeast Asian neighbourhood, such as the concerns of Myanmar and Bangladesh, have held these projects back.

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government enterprise would build and operate the premises until such time as it is ready to hand it over to a private entity. This has a number of merits. First, it would help overcome the land acquisition problem as the government would be tasked with the job of procuring land upon which these buildings may be constructed. Second, if the assets are well-maintained, which is rarely the case in the Northeast; it may incentivize further investments in the region by projecting an image of effective operations and maintenance. Third, this can have a domino effect in accelerating investment which would in turn attract people from the Northeast who are known to have high visibility in the hospitality sector in other parts of India to come looking for opportunities, thereby assisting customer service and other ground services.

Another major deficit is air connectivity. Proposals for Greenfield airports in the Northeast have barely taken root (with the singular exception of the airport at Pakyong, Sikkim, whose construction is complete but has yet to be operationalized), and the future of an Open Skies Policy as introduced by the ASEAN-India Aviation Cooperation Framework, which could be a trade and tourism multiplier, is unclear. While it is unrealistic to expect all the Northeastern states to have fully operational international air capabilities, the Ministry of Civil Aviation can endeavour to improve and develop the Guwahati airport as a hub for international tourism in the region, following the statement in Assam's tourism policy: "Guwahati will be developed as a major national and international air hub." Although there has been a marked improvement in the region's internal air linkages, it is still not sufficient on an operational level as the airports are technologically and managerially ill-equipped. For instance, the Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati falls rather short of its grand name: Air India's international flights between Guwahati and Bangkok came to a standstill in 2008, very soon after they were initiated in 2005. Interestingly, in 2009, DoNER offered subsidies to private airlines for the

development of a regional air service, but there were no takers. This was apparently on the grounds of there not being enough demand for air services, the topography of the region and problematic night landings hindering the profit-making window of such enterprises. These shortcomings, however, could have been remedied by implementing cargo operations in the absence of passengers, convenient schedules and effective publicity.

Currently, Druk Air is the only airline that plies internationally between Guwahati and Paro and Bangkok. The basic complaint of a paucity of inbound international visitors makes the maintenance and operation of regular international flights a cumbersome and loss-making exercise. For this, chartering flights during festival seasons and packaging and promoting them abundantly is an idea worth serious thought because despite claims that the granting of clearances to charter flights has been liberalized, nothing seems to have happened thus far.

Communitization

Work on integrating tourism circuits should be supplemented by an emergence of rural, community-based tourism. All versions of the Northeastern states' tourism policies have an identifiable *leitmotif*: that of sustainable tourism that emphasizes and enhances community participation.

Communitization as a concept stresses community participation and a pilot of this will soon be officially underway in Nagaland once properly legislated. Such programmes should be given primacy in other states as well because they can empower and motivate communities to feel personally responsible for the tourism promotion and projection of the region and areas they belong to.

III ADDRESSING THE SECURITY RESTRICTIONS

Tour operators in the Northeast are keen on a review of the Restricted Area Permit (RAP), Protected Area Permit (PAP) and the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to promote tourism, many of which escape revision because due to bureaucratic red-tapism and an unwillingness to periodically appraise the restrictions. The ILP is required for Indian citizens who wish to visit Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram; the PAP and the RAP are

applicable to foreign nationals who have to be granted special permission to travel on recognized routes by the relevant authorities. Some other applicable conditions are: group travel as opposed to individual, restrictions on the number of days and travel only on recognized routes. There has also been an expression of interest in this matter from some government representatives, such as the Parliamentary Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture. A convergence of interests between civil society and certain sections of the government is rare, and often beneficial.

PAP restrictions on Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland have been lifted for a year with effect from 1 January 2011 and there have been reports from Manipur that already there is a distinct rise in the number of visitors to the state. Nevertheless, in this case, it would be wise to first consider whether the easing or removal of these restrictions and permits would adversely affect the security of an individual and of the region, even though they can quite understandably be a hindrance. In addition, there is the issue of insurgency and conflict in the Northeast. Statements made to the press by law and order personnel imply that militancy is on the wane in the Northeast which if true is of significance, as security is an important cog in the wheel of tourism; it can have a negative effect on both investments and tourism.

IV CONCLUSIONS

That the government regards tourism as of immense consequence can hardly be overstated; indeed, this dedication is fervently declared at every meeting, convention and seminar that is held for discourses on the subject. The tourism policies of the Northeastern states are extremely well-meaning in their aims and in their grandstanding. However, despite the collective keenness in tourism development, the translation of assurances from paper to reality has yet to be realized and actual results are just as obscure as they were yesterday.

The primary hurdles of publicity, tools of infrastructure facilitation and administrative and security review and reform ought to be first taken into consideration in conjunction with community participation for the successful execution of a dynamic tourism policy.