



## ADVANCING THE ROLE OF TOURISM IN THE ECONOMY OF ASSAM

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260401022>

#### Abstract

Assam is situated in Northeast India and land blessed with natural beauty and featuring a mix of plains and hills. The state reflects a rich amalgamation of culture and religious heritage. Its abundant biodiversity and heritage assets draw the attention of domestic and international tourists. Apart from this, the tourism sector in Assam remains largely underdeveloped due to challenges such as poor infrastructure, inadequate road connectivity, limited accommodations, and insufficient transportation facilities. Due to its untapped potential, it offers great opportunities for economic development by generating revenues, creating employment, and promoting local entrepreneurship, as well as building a bridge for individuals to experience different landscapes, traditions, and people's local lifestyles. The paper aims to elaborate on Assam as a tourist destination and its potential contribution to the economy of Assam.

**Keywords:** *Economic Growth, Infrastructure, Biodiversity, Challenges*

#### Introduction

Travel refers to the activity associated with arrival and departure at the time of pleasure, prosperity, holidays, and leisure (Chavda, R.B, 2019). That means tourism involves people traveling away from home to places for leisure and recreation, relaxation, and pleasure. People also include them for their purposes, such as business trips, educational trips, and trips to family and friends. Therefore, tourism is considered a key driver of economic development as it generates foreign exchange earnings, creates direct and indirect employment opportunities, and stimulates various other economic activities, influences social and infrastructural development, particularly in developing regions. Assam is culturally rich and naturally diverse, with vibrant traditions as well as green landscapes, dense forests, and a humid subtropical climate. This biodiversity plays a vital role in its ecology and economy. The state holds immense potential to develop a flourishing tourism sector capable of creating jobs and boosting income in both urban and rural areas such as tea gardens, rich wildlife, colorful festivals, diverse dance forms, and exquisite handicrafts. Despite these, tourism sector of Assam has faced many challenges such as being developed in an unorganized and unplanned manner, insufficient government funding, and improper investment. It has led to restricted development and inadequate promotion of the tourism industry.

Assam has various tourist destinations that play a significant role in the economy of the state. The tourism sector in Assam has considerable potential to boost economic growth by creating employment and generating revenue. However, the actual employment generated by the tourism industry in Assam remains unsatisfactory, and revenue from both domestic and international tourists is not very promising as expected (Gogoi, 2017). Assam's tourism potential and emphasized that the state is emerging as a major tourist destination. Tourism is now widely recognized as a significant industry with immense potential to generate income and create employment opportunities. In the world, tourism is the fastest-growing sector that contributes substantially to foreign exchange earnings. Moreover, tourism can act as a powerful tool for promoting harmony and resolving conflicts between different states and communities (Chutia, 2015). Tourism contributes significantly to the country's economic development by creating various job opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers. In Assam, tourism industry has a well-developed infrastructure that allows it to compete in the global market. This industry significantly accelerates Assam's economic growth by strengthening economy. This has also created a robust domestic market and establishing a global one (Saikia, 2022). Rural Assam holds significant promise of attracting tourists seeking authentic natural beauty and rich culture. It has the potential to improve the tourism industry through socio-economic development, but there are also several challenges to address (Hazarika, 2021). Tourism increases the tourist demand, generates job opportunities, and boosts income. In other words, it makes and ensures inclusive growth and broadens opportunities across all segments of society. The main objective of this study is to provide the means and the end of improving tourism industry with all aspects of opportunities in tourism sector (Saikia, 2019).

Although Assam has beautiful scenic landscapes, biodiversity, and cultural diversity. This offers enormous tourism potential, but this research on tourism was mainly carried out by scholars to identify the potential gaps. The region's tourism sector remains insufficient to explore developmental and economic perspectives. While several studies have focused on the general tourism prospects of Assam. This research is a comprehensive study specifically analyzing the tourism potential of Assam and the local economic contribution for development. Therefore, this research seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth understanding of Assam tourists' destinations, highlighting their potential contribution to the state's economy, and discussing current challenges. This extracts insights from secondary data sources such as books, journals, articles, reports, and publications.

The Objectives of this study are to discuss the tourist destinations of Assam, to examine the economic contribution of tourism in Assam, and to identify the key challenges in the development of tourism in Assam.

### **Methodology**

This study is based entirely on secondary data. Information on Assam's tourist destination and economic contribution has been collected from the Directorate of Tourism, the Ministry of Tourism, the statistical handbook of Assam, the Regional Tourism Satellite Account Assam, etc. Moreover, numerous journals, articles, and books have been consulted to gather the necessary information.

### **Discussion**

#### **Tourist destination of Assam**

**Wildlife Tourism:** Assam is a treasure trove of biodiversity, with numerous national parks and wildlife sanctuaries that play a pivotal role in conservation and ecotourism. The state boasts seven national parks and many wildlife sanctuaries, including UNESCO World Heritage Sites like Kaziranga and Manas National Parks. The national parks and wildlife sanctuaries are rich in natural beauty and biodiversity such as stunning landscapes shaped by the Brahmaputra River and its wetlands, lush forests and the scenic Jia Bhoroli River, and rainforest. There are variants of flora and fauna such as the iconic one-horned rhinoceros, Bengal tigers, golden langurs, feral horses and migratory birds. Assam is also home to several endangered species, including primates like the hoolock gibbon, stump-tailed macaque, Assam roofed turtle, and golden langur, pygmy hog which is the smallest wild pig in the world, and the critically endangered white-winged wood duck, a unique waterfowl. Himalayan foothills further enrich Assam's biodiversity. These protected areas not only provide a safe haven for endangered species but also promote ecotourism, supporting the livelihoods of local communities. The total number of tourists visiting prominent national parks and a wildlife sanctuary in Assam between 2019 and 2023. Kaziranga National Park recorded the highest tourist footfall during this period, with 10.96 lakh visitors. It was followed by Manas National Park, which welcomed 2.08 lakh visitors, and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, attracting 1.16 lakh tourists. Nameri National Park saw approximately 0.41(41,454) lakh visitors, while Orang National Park received 0.11lakh (11,892) tourists. Dibru-Saikhowa National Park had the lowest tourist count, with 0.05 lakh (5,072) visitors.

#### **Religious Tourism**

Religious tourism involves traveling for spiritual, belief, and faith-based purposes where people visit holy places to seek blessings and participate in rituals. It plays a contributing role in cultural preservation, supporting community development, and boosting tourism economies worldwide.

**Kamakhya Temple:** The Kamakhya Temple, a renowned Shakti Peeth dedicated to Goddess Kamakhya, is one of India's most significant pilgrimage destinations. Every year, it draws thousands of devotees, particularly during the Ambubachi Mela held in June. Between 2019 and 2023, the temple recorded a total of 51.27 lakh visitors, including both domestic and international tourists. The highest number of visitors was in 2019, with 22.79 lakh pilgrims, comprising both local and foreign arrivals.

**Umananda Temple:** The smallest river island which is dedicated to Lord Shiva. It is also known as Peacock Island.

**Doul Govinda Temple:** Situated on the bank of the Brahmaputra river which is dedicated to lord Krishna and particularly famous for colorful Holi celebrations.

**Maha Mrityunjay Temple:** located in Nagaon district, Assam, houses the world's largest Shivalinga and became a major tourist attraction in 2021, drawing a significant number of visitors throughout the year.

**Hajo:** Hajo is a symbol of religious harmony, and is home to sacred sites from multiple faiths, including the Hayagriva Madhava Temple for Hindus, Poa Mecca for Muslims, and several Buddhist shrines.

#### **Cultural and Ethical Tourism**

**Majuli Island:** Majuli is the largest river island in the world and famous for its Satras culture. It also promotes spiritual teachings, traditional art, and music. Between 2019 to 2023, Majuli island recorded a total number of tourists both domestic and foreign is 0.59 lakh (58,556).

**Bordowa (Nagaon):** Bordowa is the birthplace of Srimanta Sankardeva, the founder of Assamese Vaishnavism and it is a significant site for devotees.

Shankar Dev Kalakhetra: Kalakhetra was established in honor of Srimanta Sankaradeva. It is known as the Cultural Museum and Art Gallery, which represents the artifacts, sculptures, paintings, and traditional items of Assamese culture and tradition. The number of domestic and foreign tourists who visited is 17.79 lakh from 2019 to 2023.

**Cultural and Heritage Tourism:** Sivasagar is celebrated for its vibrant cultural heritage, historical monuments, and remarkable architectural structures that showcase the splendor of the Ahom dynasty. Notable landmarks include the Sivasagar Sivadol, Rang Ghar, Talatal Ghar, Kareng Ghar, and the Joysagar Tank along with its surrounding temples.

**Festival Culture and Ethics in Tourism:** Assam is rich in traditional culture which is community and ethics-based. The grand celebration of Bihu and Ambubachi Mela, connected people and provided tourists with authentic cultural experiences while supporting local livelihoods. Assam is also rich in crafts and handlooms such as Sualkuchi, known as the “Silk Village of Assam,” where traditional fabrics like Muga and Eri silk are handcrafted using sustainable methods.

**Nature-based Tourism**

Hill Stations and Forests: Haflong and Dehing Patkai Rainforests boast dense greenery, stunning landscapes, and excellent trekking opportunities. Haflong provides scenic views and serene surroundings. Dehing Patkai is perfect for eco-tours, birdwatching, and discovering unique flora and fauna.

River Tourism: The Rivers of Assam offer breathtaking views. Therefore, Visitors enjoy river rafting, angling, and serene nature walks along the banks of this picturesque river such as the mighty Brahmaputra, Barak River, and Jia Bhoroli River.

Wetlands and Lakes: Deepor Beel is a freshwater lake and Ramsar site near Guwahati, popular for birdwatching and spotting migratory birds. Chandubi Lake is a serene lake formed after the 1897 earthquake, offering boating, fishing, and a natural retreat.

Tea Garden Tourism: British introduced the tea plant in 1823 to Assam. At present, tea is not only a cultural symbol but also boosts Assam’s economy. It attracts thousands of tourists from around the world and promotes sustainable livelihoods for millions of workers.

Eco and sustainable Tourism: Assam has great opportunities to develop tourism while simultaneously focusing on sustainability. It has minimized negative impacts on the environment and supported the conservation of natural resources such as green forests, hills, and rich biodiversity. It also promotes the well-being of local communities and preserves cultural heritage.

**Contribution of Tourism in Assam towards the Economy**

**Income and Revenue**

In Assam, tourists visit for various purposes- some come for business, education, sports, and medical treatment, while others visit to explore nature, experience culture, and leisure or recreational activities. These diverse purposes of tourists bring a certain amount of money with them, which they allocate for various expenses such as food, accommodation, transportation, and entry fees. This money circulate contributes to income generated in the local economy. As a result, these tourist expenditure becomes a major sources of revenue for the state through taxes, service charges, and business income. Ultimately, tourism sectors contribute to revenue generation and reflect the region’s income and economic growth.

**Table 1: Tourism status of Assam from 2014 to 2023**

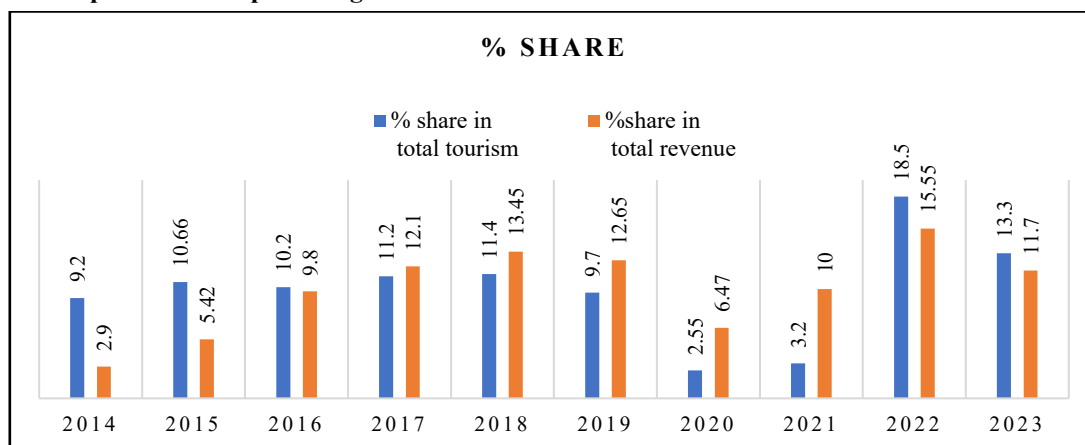
Year	Domestic Tourist	Foreign Tourist	Revenue
2014	48,63,826	20,005	49,13,860
2015	56,42,950	26,320	92,13,492
2016	54,13,156	28,419	1,66,06,650
2017	59,34,791	31,739	2,05,76,627
2018	60,27,002	41,209	2,28,43,279
2019	51,54,307	18,594	2,14,61,173
2020	13,51,690	347	1,09,71,743
2021	17,01,701	1,231	1,69,18,063
2022	98,12,195	18,946	2,64,09,895
2023	70,41,206	26,129	1,98,38,168
Total	52942824	212939	16,97,52,950

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam

The table highlights the total number of tourist arrivals (both domestic and foreign) in Assam from 2014 to 2023, along with the revenue generated during this period. From 2014 to 2023, Assam saw around 530 lakh (5.3 crore) tourist arrivals and generated a revenue of approximately ₹1698 lakh (₹16.98crore). The growth rate of domestic tourists stands at 45%, foreign tourists at 31%, and the revenue growth rate is an impressive 304% since 2014. The most popular tourist destinations in the state include Kamrup Metro, Kamrup, Jorhat, Golaghat, Naogaon, Sivasagar, Baska, Morigaon, and Majuli, followed by other districts. The

highest number of tourists was recorded in Kamrup Metro, followed by Jorhat and Sivasagar. The revenue is also generated from various lodges, Taz Vananta, and tour operators which are managed by the Government of Assam.

**Graph1: Share of percentage from total tourists and total revenue between 2014 and 2023**



Source: Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam

The graph illustrates the percentage share of tourists and revenue from the total over the past 10 years. In 2014, the percentage share of total tourism was 9.2%, and by 2023, it increased to 13.35%. The highest share during this period was in 2022, at 18.5%. Similarly, the percentage share of total revenue was 2.9% in 2014 and rose to 11.7% in 2023. The year 2022 saw the highest share of revenue, at 15.55%. This steady rise in revenue reflects an increase in the contribution of tourism to the state's income and economic growth.

### Employment

The tourism sector plays a significant role in the economy of Assam by contributing directly and indirectly. Direct contribution provides the region's economy through businesses like hotels, restaurants, and tour operators, which create jobs and contribute to the region's income (measured as a share of Gross Value Added or GVA). Indirect Contribution comes from the connections that the sector has with other industries such as tourism increases demand for local food suppliers, transport services, handicrafts, and construction (e.g., building hotels). This builds stronger connections and a bigger ripple effect on the economy. Direct and indirect contributions primarily affect all aspects of the economy, especially employment. This creates a cycle where increased income leads to higher consumption, which drives expenditure and contributes to the Gross Value Added (GVA), amplifying the overall economic impact through a multiplier effect. In Assam, the tourism sector's direct contribution to the economy was 2.19%, while its total share was 4.32% in 2015-2016, placing the state at the 22<sup>nd</sup> rank nationally.

**Table 2: Contribution of Tourism in economy (%)**

Item	Assam	All India
Tourism Direct GVA, (TDGVA)	2.19	2.78
GVATI	3.21	4.8
Tourism Employment	4.41	5.4
GVA multiplier	1.9685	1.9236
Employment multipliers	1.9836	2.2931
TDGVA - direct and indirect	4.32	5.35
GVATI-direct and indirect	6.32	9.24
Tourism Employment – direct and indirect	8.75	12.38

Source: Regional Tourism Satellite Account Assam, 2015-2016, Assam

During 2015–2016, the contribution of tourism to Assam's economy was compared to the national economy in several aspects. The total number of jobs in the state was 147.72 lakh, which contributes about 2.53% to India's total employment. Out of the total employment, tourism-characteristic industries in Assam were 6.51 lakh, which are directly engaged in tourism-related industries such as hospitality, accommodation, food services, transportation, and cultural or recreational activities. This means the tourism sector of Assam contributes 2.07% of tourism-related employment in India. In terms of economic indicators, Assam's Gross Value Added (GVA) from tourism industries and Tourism Direct Gross Value Added (TDGVA) were below the national levels. However, the GVA multiplier in Assam stood out at 1.9685%, which was higher than the national average. This suggests that the state's direct contribution to the impacts of tourism on the economy is more significant, reflecting the potential for growth if tourism is developed sustainably.

**Table 3: Employment in Tourism industries**

Tourism industries	Number of jobs		
	Self Employed	Employees	Total
Accommodation services/Hotels	10,083	4,861	14,944
Food and beverage serving services/ Restaurants	87,090	51,927	1,39,017
Railway passenger transport services	0	23,031	23,031
Road passenger transport services	1,39,085	1,09,535	2,48,620
Water passenger transport services	0	3,156	3,156
Air passenger transport services	0	0	0
Transport equipment rental services	15,231	0	15,231
Travel agencies and other reservation services/Supporting and auxiliary transport activities	1,648	8,343	9,991
Cultural and religious services	3,713	16,468	20,181
Sports and other recreational services	1,227	5,179	6,406
Health and medical-related services	17,109	1,53,548	1,70,657
Total jobs in tourism characteristic industries	2,75,185	3,76,048	6,51,233
Total Jobs in the State	78,48,230	96,23,531	1,47,71,760
Share of Tourism in total	3.51	5.43	4.41

Source: Regional Tourism Satellite Account Assam, 2015-2016, Assam

Table 3 highlights the jobs generated in the tourism industries across various aspects in Assam. It shows that 78.48 lakh jobs were generated through self-employment, accounting for 3.51% of the total share of tourism. Employment through salaried jobs amounted to 96.23 lakh, contributing 5.43% to the total. When combined, the total employment in tourism industries in the state reached approximately 147 lakh (1.47 crore), representing 4.41% of the overall tourism share. This data underscores the significant role of both self-employment and formal jobs in driving Assam’s tourism-related economic activities. This steady growth reflects the increasing contribution of the tourism sector to the state’s economy, showcasing its potential as a key driver of economic development in Assam.

#### **Key challenges in the development of tourism in Assam**

**Ineffective marketing:** One of the primary challenges facing tourism sector of Assam is ineffective marketing and publicity. Lack of dedicated department blogs, inadequate use of media channels, minimal presence on social platforms and outdated websites, and lack of coordinated efforts contribute to low awareness among potential tourists. Without engaging marketing campaigns, tourists remain unaware of the state’s offerings. As a result, tourism potential is underutilized for economic benefits and regional development.

**Lack of proper infrastructure, transportation, and communication facilities:** A strong and efficient transportation and communication network is fundamental to the growth and success of tourism development. But poor road connectivity, inadequate accommodation (hotels, home stay, resort, and restaurant), poor public transportation, and weak communication can leave a negative impression on tourists. This is also ultimately restricting the growth of tourism sector and diminishing the overall visitor experience.

**Insurgency and conflict issues:** Insurgency and conflict have persisted since earlier times and continue to be major obstacles to the development of tourism in Assam. These include the activities of armed groups, ethnic tensions, and repeated demands for autonomy by various communities. Frequent strikes or bandhs, political protests, and sporadic incidents of violence have heightened concerns about safety and security. As a result, domestic and international tourists often view Assam as a risky and unsafe destination due to the unstable law and order situation. There is a widespread concern that tourists, especially foreigners—could become vulnerable targets for insurgent groups, further discouraging travel to the region.

#### **Conclusion**

The present study concludes that despite the significant tourist destinations and potential of the Assam tourism sector, its contribution to the state’s economy is still limited. Revenue earnings from both domestic and foreign tourists, as well as employment generation through tourism in Assam, remain unsatisfactory. Overcoming the existing challenges is crucial for the growth of Assam’s tourism sector. For the development of tourism industry in Assam, existing challenges must be addressed. Therefore, the following suggestions can be made-

- Both physical infrastructure and digital connectivity should be strengthened to improve transportation and communication facilities.
- Develop the targeted and strategic marketing plan that attracts the uniqueness of the tourist destination.
- To regain the tourist confidence, security measures must be strengthened and peace initiatives implemented in conflict-prone areas.

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author's Contribution:** *Neha Gupta*: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** Not Applicable

**Competing Interest:** No

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*The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal* remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

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