

RIVER TOURISM IN ASSAM – A CRITICAL SWOT ANALYSIS

Dr. Gour Gopal Banik

Associate Professor, Department of Accountancy, Gauhati Commerce College, Guwahati –
781021

Recognised Ph.D Guide, Department of Commerce, Gauhati University, Guwahati - 781014

Neeta Longjam

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Gauhati University, Guwahati - 781014

Abstract: *Assam is well-known for its numerous ethnic populations, rich cultural heritage, Assam Silk and tea-growing industry. It is one of the most famous states of North Eastern India. The State shares borders with West Bengal, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura. Assam is well known for its agricultural activities, especially tea production and its tea is prized for its distinctive flavour across the world. Geographically, Assam is a state with stunning natural beauty, with the mighty Brahmaputra River passing through its territory. The state is home to Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that protects the endangered one-horned rhinoceros. Assam is becoming a popular travel destination for those who love nature and wildlife because of its beautiful scenery and diverse animals. One of the most recent tourism developments in the State is River tourism.*

This paper tries to explore the potential for growth and development in the tourism sector of the State, especially river tourism. To evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with river tourism in Assam, a SWOT analysis is conducted. It provides a thorough insight of the existing state of river tourism in the area and helps in identifying potential challenges and areas for improvement.

Keywords: River Tourism, Assam and Brahmaputra River.

Introduction:

The State of Assam offers a unique and alluring experience for tourists looking to explore the unspoiled beauty of nature and immerse themselves in the rich cultural legacy of the area, with the mighty Brahmaputra River serving as its focal point. River tourism in Assam opens doors to a world of remarkable experiences. The state's untainted rivers, such as the Brahmaputra and Barak flow through scenic valleys, deep forests and small towns, providing a fantastic backdrop for river cruises and adventures.

To realise its potential as a thriving tourist destination, the state has been actively promoting tourism and attracting investors in recent years. An important step in presenting the state's investment prospects was reached in 2018 with the 'Advantage Assam' Global Investors' Summit. Additionally, to improve infrastructure, include local communities and promote inclusive and sustainable tourism, the governments of India and Assam have developed tourism policies in recent years.

Profile of the State of Assam:

The State of Assam is located in the North Eastern Region (NER) of India. It is known for its

diverse ethnic communities, rich cultural legacy and tea production. The total area of Assam is 78,438 km². The state is bordered to the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, to the east by Nagaland and Manipur, to the south by Meghalaya, to the southeast by Tripura, to the southwest by Mizoram, and to the west by West Bengal via the Siliguri Corridor.¹

The State's official language is Assamese and Bodo, which is used by majority of its population. Bengali and other native languages are also spoken by a sizeable section of the population. The religion mostly practiced in the State is Hinduism (61.47%), followed by Islam (34.22%) and Christianity (3.74%).² One of the most significant cultural festivals in Assam is the Bihu festival, which is observed with great joy. It displays the regional cuisine, dance and music. The majority of people in Assam are engaged in agriculture. The state is well-known for its tea production and Assam tea is famous throughout the world for its distinctive flavour.

Geographically, Assam is known for its exquisite natural beauty, especially the mighty Brahmaputra, which pass through the state. The state is home to the rare one-horned rhinoceros sanctuary and UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kaziranga National Park. Assam is emerging as a popular vacation destination for those who enjoy outdoors and wildlife.

Prominent rivers of Assam:

The river system in Assam is very large and many tributaries flow from these rivers as well. The major rivers in Assam are Brahmaputra and Barak River. The Brahmaputra, which has thirteen tributaries, is Assam's primary river and source of life. Brahmaputra is one of the largest rivers in the world and rank fifth with respect to its average discharge. The river originates from the Kailash ranges of the Himalayas at an elevation of 5300 M. After flowing through Tibet, it enters India through Arunachal Pradesh and flows through Assam and Bangladesh before it joins Bay of Bengal.³

The Barak River passes through the Indian states of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Assam for 900 kilometres. After crossing into Bangladesh, it splits into the Surma and Kushiyara rivers, which then merge once more to form the Meghna River. The Meghna then joins the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers to form the Ganges Delta before draining into the Bay of Bengal.⁴

Definition of River tourism:

The term 'river tourism' is the practice of using rivers and waterways for leisure travel and tourism. It comprises travelling along rivers and the areas around them, while also exploring and taking in the locations, attractions and sceneries. There are many different types of river tourism ranging from quick day cruises to longer journeys lasting several days or even weeks. Depending on the size and navigability of the river, it can be enjoyed on a variety of boats, including riverboats, cruise ships, houseboats, or even smaller watercraft like kayaks or canoes. Additionally, river tourism provides chances to take part in a variety of recreational pursuits. Tourists can engage in sports like fishing, swimming, water skiing, kayaking, or simply

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam>

² 2011 Census of India, Government of India.

³ <https://waterresources.assam.gov.in/portlet-innerpage/brahmaputra-river-system#:~:text=The%20main%20river%20of%20the,an%20elevation%20of%205300%20M.>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barak_River

relaxing on deck and taking in the scenery, depending on the location and unique features of the river. The onboard amenities that river cruises frequently offer, like restaurants, bars, entertainment and guided excursions, improve the whole experience for passengers.

Advantage Assam:

‘Advantage Assam’ refers to the Global Investors’ Summit that took place in Assam in February 2018. Delegates from all over the world and nearly 4,000 domestic and international industry leaders participated in the summit inaugurated by Prime minister, Narendra Modi.⁵ The summit aimed to promote the state’s investment potential and draw domestic and foreign investors across various industries in the State. The objective of the Submit is to position Assam as India’s Expressway to ASEAN.⁶

The submit aimed at emphasizing the state’s favourable economic environment, regulatory reforms, ease of doing business and incentives for investors. It attempted to market Assam as an investment-friendly destination. The Assam government presented a number of initiatives and programmes, such as single-window clearance systems, infrastructure development plans and skill development programmes, aimed at promoting and facilitating investments.

On the first day of the submit, 176 MOUs with 160 Companies amounting to Rs. 65,186 Crore were signed. The following table shows the amount of money invested in day 1.⁷

Name of the Company	Amount will be invested (Crore Rs.)
ONGC	13,000
Oil India Limited	10,000
IOCL	3,432
Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL)	3,410
Indo-UK Institute of Health	2,700
Reliance Group of Industries	2,500
Century Plyboards	2,100
Spicejet	1,250
Infinity Group	1,000
McLeod Russel	700

(Source: <http://www.silcharlive.com/2018/02/assam-gets-rs-65186-crore-investment-silcharlive.html>)

The submit gave investors a forum to interact with government representatives, industry leaders and regional companies in order to explore prospects and plan future partnerships. With numerous sessions, seminars and networking activities planned throughout the summit, it also helped participants share ideas and knowledge.

Act East Policy:

The Act East Policy was introduced in 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It describes

⁵ https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/global-investors-summit-assam-gets-rs-65186-crore-investment-commitments-on-day-1/amp_articleshow/62770223.cm

⁶ <https://www.guwahatipuls.com/guwahati/what-is-advantage-assam>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam_Global_Investors%27_Summit

India's foreign policy approach, which aims to increase its strategic and economic engagement with the nations of East and Southeast Asia. The Act East Policy was developed as a successor to the Look East Policy (1991). The Act East Policy reflects India's desire to deepen its political, economic and cultural ties with countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. The primary objectives of the policy include increasing connectivity, cultural exchange, strengthening economic ties and regional co-operation, enhancing strategic partnerships, etc.

The following are some of the major projects under the policy:

1. The Asian Highway Project (AH1), also known as the **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway Project**, is a significant infrastructure project that aims to improve connectivity and foster economic integration between India, Myanmar and Thailand. The project includes development of a highway network connecting Moreh in the northeastern state of Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. The route travels through the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram before entering Tamu, Myanmar. It then continues through Mandalay and Yangon before entering Thailand.
2. **The Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project** is developed to establish a multi-modal transportation network connecting ports in Kolkata with Sittwe, a port in Myanmar and further extending to Mizoram.
3. **The Rhi-Tiddim Road** is part of the larger Trans-Asian Highway network, which connects several countries in Asia. The road stretches from Rhi village in Myanmar to Tiddim road in Manipur.
4. **The Agartala-Akhaura Rail Link** is a significant railway connectivity project between India and Bangladesh. The rail connection will provide access to Bangladesh's Chittagong Port and serve as a crucial point of connectivity and trade in Northeastern India.

Apart from the above major projects, there are numerous others that were approved under the Central Sector Scheme (CSS) of Inland Water Transport (IWT). These projects are being carried out by the respective State Governments in the NE Regions. They are shown in the following table:

Table: Projects sanctioned under Central Sector Scheme

State	Name of Project	Project Cost (Rs. In Crores)
Assam	Construction of 15 nos. Floating terminals in 15 Ghats on NW-2	6.07
	Construction of 15 nos. Floating terminals in 15 Ghats on NW-16	6.37
	Construction of 25 nos. Floating terminals at 25 Ghats on NW-2	10.97
	Construction of 16 nos. Floating terminals at 16 Ghats on NW-2	13.7

Manipur	Loktak Inland Water Transport Project-II on Loktak Lake	7.88
	Project proposal for utilising the savings under CSS for ‘Survey of River Barak (Manipur side)’	0.4
	Loktak Inland Waterways Improvement Project for Loktak Lake	25.58
Mizoram	Preparation of DPR for Tuichawang / Karnaphuli River	0.57
	Development of IWT on river Khawthlangtuipui-Tuichawng in Lunglei District, Mizoram	22.93
Tripura	Setting up of linkage with Meghna River system in Bangladesh by developing Gumti River	24.83

(Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 29th March, 2022)

Assam Government Tourism Policy:

In today’s world, tourism is a significant driver of economic growth. Through tourism, a number of nations have transformed their economies. From unskilled to skilled employment, tourism has a huge potential to generate jobs on a large scale.

The first Assam Tourism policy was introduced in 2008 and the main focus under this policy was given to Public Private Partnership. The second Assam Tourism Policy was announced in 2017 focusing on enhancement of major economic sectors. The third Assam Tourism Policy was introduced in 2022 with a focus to improve infrastructure of Assam’s different tourist destination.

The Key features of Assam Tourism Policy 2022 is as follows⁸:

1. Engage local communities in tourism development.
2. Support the development of Home Stay or Amar Alohi Schemes.
3. Coordinate tourism and transport sectors.
4. Create Special Tourism Zones (STZ) to boost different types of tourism. The different types of tourism to be created in STZs are various. Some of them are as follows;
 - Tea Tourism
 - Wildlife Tourism
 - Ethnic Tourism
 - River Tourism
 - Spiritual Tourism
 - Adventure Tourism
 - Eco Tourism, etc.
5. Encourage private sector investment in tourism.

Indian Government Tourism Policy:

The Government of India has released a draft National Tourism Policy, 2022. Once officially released, the Policy will be in effect for the next 10 years. This is the most recent tourism policy after the last one i.e., National Tourism Policy, 2002.

⁸ <https://www.guwahatilive.com/assam-tourism-policy/>

The National Tourism Policy, 2022 will give focus on five key areas i.e. green tourism, digital tourism, destination management, skilling the hospitality sector and supporting tourism-related to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).⁹ The main objective of the policy are as follows¹⁰:

- Make India a year-round travel destination and boost the contribution of tourism to the economy.
- Create jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities in the tourism sector.
- Make the tourism industry more competitive and attract private sector investment.
- Preserve and enhance natural and cultural resources.
- Ensure sustainable, ethical and inclusive tourism

The policy also outlines various targets which it aims to achieve. Some of the targets are given in the table below.

Table: Policy targets under Draft National Tourism Policy, 2022

	2023	2030	2040	2047
International Tourist Arrival (in Million)	13	25	56	100
Domestic Tourist Visits (in Billion)	2	4	10	15
Foreign Exchange Earnings (in \$ Billion)	30	56	175	400
Employment (in Million)	88	137	257	400
Tourism GDP (in \$ Billion)	143	248	550	1000

(Source: Draft National Tourism Policy, 2022, Ministry of Tourism, GOI)

SWOT Analysis of River Tourism in Assam:

The State of Assam known for its stunning scenery and extensive cultural legacy, has a lot of potential for river tourism. The state's vast network of rivers which includes the magnificent Brahmaputra, presents an exceptional potential to create and expand tourism-related ventures along their banks. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with river tourism in Assam, a SWOT analysis has been conducted. The internal and external aspects that may affect the growth and success of river tourism in the area are highlighted in the analysis.

Strength:

1. **Rich Natural Resources:** The Brahmaputra River is the most notable of the various rivers that flow through Assam. There are several opportunities for river-based activities like boating, river cruises and water sports along the Brahmaputra. The river is bordered by dense vegetation as well as mesmerising scenery and calm surroundings.
2. **Biodiversity and Wildlife:** Assam has a rich biodiversity because of its distinctive geography and varied ecosystems. The environment along the riverbanks of Brahmaputra and its tributaries provides a great habitat for a wide variety of plant and animal species. The potential for animal viewing and eco-tourism along the riverbanks

⁹ https://www.drishtiiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/draft-national-tourism-policy/print_manually

¹⁰ <https://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/national-tourism-policy-upsc-notes/>

is also increased by the presence of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries like Kaziranga, Manas and Dibru-Saikhowa.

3. **Unique River Cruises:** The main route for river cruises in Assam is the Brahmaputra River. These excursions provide a fantastic opportunity to discover the beautiful scenery, wildlife-rich regions and cultural treasures that line the riverbanks. The cruises normally depart from Guwahati or Jorhat and visit a number of locations including Dibrugarh, Majuli Island and Kaziranga National Park. On these cruises, visitors can see magnificent sunrises and sunsets, view wildlife, visit tea gardens and engage with locals. Apart from this, river island cruises may be included to islands such Umananda Island, Peacock Island and Neematighat Island.
4. **Potential for Adventure Tourism:** The presence of rivers opens up avenues for adventure activities like river rafting, kayaking and boating. This will attract adventure seekers to the region.

Weaknesses:

1. **Limited Infrastructure:** Assam's current river tourist infrastructure, which includes ports and passenger facilities, may not be adequate and may require further development. The smooth operation of river cruises and the quality of the overall tourist experience can be hampered by inadequate infrastructure.
2. **Seasonal restrictions:** River tourism in Assam is mostly focused on the Brahmaputra River, which has substantial seasonal changes in water levels. The river swells during the monsoon season, posing navigational difficulties and safety issues for river excursions. It can be challenging to keep consistent cruise schedules throughout the year.
3. **Connectivity Challenges:** Limited connectivity options may pose as hindrance for tourist. Remote riverine areas may experience connectivity issues, which could hinder visitors' ability to move freely and reach tourism sites.

Opportunities:

1. **Untapped Potential:** Assam's River tourism is still mostly untapped, which presents a chance for the sector to expand and diversify. By diversifying the routes and introducing new itineraries, it can attract a broader range of tourists and cater to different interests and preferences.
2. **Cultural Experiences:** The State's diverse cultural legacy can be used to provide tourists with special cultural experience. Tourism services can be enhanced by planning river-based festivals and events like boat races, cultural performances on river islands and riverfront music festivals. These occasions can promote the area's cultural diversity, draw domestic and foreign tourists.
3. **River-based Adventure Activities:** More tourist can be attracted by including river rafting, kayaking adventures and river camping experiences in addition to regular river cruises. This potential can be realized by creating the necessary infrastructure,

guaranteeing safety precautions and promoting these activities to adventure tourism markets.

4. **Employment and Economic Growth:** River tourism has the ability to create jobs and aid in the development of regional economies. Jobs in a variety of industries, such as tourism, hospitality, cruise operations, tour guiding, crafts and entertainment can be created. Additionally, river tourism will benefit regional economy. It promotes the construction and upkeep of docking facilities, visitor centres and lodging facilities along the riverbanks.

Threats:

1. **Environmental Concerns:** Unplanned and uncontrolled tourism operations could endanger the delicate river ecosystems by causing pollution, the erosion of habitats and adverse effects on species.
2. **Competition from Other Destinations:** The State may face competition from other river tourism destinations within India and abroad. It may need to employ innovative marketing strategies to attract visitors.
3. **Safety and Security:** Maintaining a great tourist experience depends on ensuring the safety and security of visitors, particularly during river excursions and water-based activities.

Conclusion:

Assam has made significant progress in attracting investments and promoting business opportunities through initiatives like 'Advantage Assam'. It aimed to portray Assam as India's gateway to ASEAN and highlighted the state's favourable economic climate, regulatory reforms and ease of doing business. The importance of tourism as a driving force of economic growth and job creation is emphasised in both the Assam Government Tourism Policy and the Indian Government Tourism Policy. The policies made strong emphasis on private sector investment, community involvement and the growth of a variety of tourism industries. Assam is continuing to grow as a popular tourism and investment destination owing to its alluring scenery, cultural variety and welcoming climate.

To capitalize on these opportunities, it is crucial to concentrate on infrastructure development, sustainable practices, marketing tactics and stakeholder collaborations. By utilising these potential, river tourism in Assam can broaden its product offers, draw a bigger number of visitors and help the state's economy.

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