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RURAL TOURISM AS A CATALYST FOR SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ASSAM: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

For a state like Assam, where almost 70% of the population lives in villages, building a solid base around the idea of rural tourism is undoubtedly beneficial. Additionally, Assam is home to a number of different ethnic tribes and groups, each of which has its own unique language, culture, festivals, music, and dances. There is a lot of potential for rural Assam to draw travelers looking for genuine natural and cultural resources. Unfortunately, though, this potential has not been fully used. Even if the Assam government implements several programs, the results are only mediocre. This is the outcome of certain challenges in Assam. Based on secondary sources of data, the current study aims to emphasize the potential of rural tourism as a route to Assam's socioeconomic growth as well as the numerous problems the state faces in this regard. Additionally, the report offers suggestions for enhancing the tourist sector as a potential instrument for Assam's socioeconomic growth. (Das, 2018).

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Introduction:

Rural tourism is a type of travel that highlights rural life, art, culture, and tradition in rural areas. This benefits the local community both socially and economically and allows visitors to interact with locals for a more engaging travel experience. A relatively new branch of the tourism industry, rural tourism has developed into a promising industry. By offering a different source of income and numerous job opportunities in rural areas, it is an important tool for rural development. The majority of nations have acknowledged rural tourism as a crucial tool for rural residents' sustainable means of subsistence. ***(Singh & Kumar, 2015)***

A livelihood is made up of the skills, resources (material and social), and activities needed to support oneself. When a livelihood can withstand and bounce back from shocks and strains while maintaining or improving its resources and capacities both now and in the future, it is considered sustainable. ***(Department for International Development, 1999).***

Both at the level of the individual farmer and more broadly in the local community, rural tourism have significantly increased rural incomes. It has provided additional revenue and intersectoral connections; however it hasn't always replaced agricultural revenue. In order to create jobs and support sustainable lives through the promotion of art, craft, culture, heritage, handlooms, etc., rural tourism was designated as a focus area in the national tourist policy that was adopted in 2002. Rural tourism is not the solution;

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rather, it is a way to boost economic development, make underdeveloped areas more viable, and raise locals' standards of life.

Approximately 70% of Assam people are rural dwellers who rely mostly on agriculture. Beyond agriculture, however, rural Assam has a lot to offer. It has a lot of potential for many tourism niches, such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, health tourism, farm tourism, nature-based tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism, etc.

Background of the Study:

One of the world economy's fastest-growing industries, tourism is becoming more widely acknowledged as a useful tool for regional balance, job creation, and economic growth. The idea of rural tourism has grown in significance in recent years as a way to support sustainable development by making use of local resources, conserving cultural heritage, and enhancing the socioeconomic circumstances of rural communities. Rural tourism is a good development strategy for rural and undeveloped areas because, in contrast to mainstream tourist, it places an emphasis on community involvement, environmental conservation, and inclusive growth. ***(Sharma, & Dutta, 2017)***

India has enormous potential for the growth of rural tourism due to its huge rural environment, diversified cultures, and rich natural heritage. Through a number of programs, including village tourism, eco-tourism, and community-based tourism, the Indian government has recognized this potential. In addition to giving rural residents other sources of income, rural tourism also contributes to lowering migration, boosting local economies, and maintaining traditional ways of life.

The northeastern Indian state of Assam is blessed with a wealth of natural beauty, rich biodiversity, distinctive cultural customs, and a lively rural lifestyle. Strong opportunities for rural tourism are created by the state's picturesque riverine scenery, tea gardens, traditional crafts, indigenous festivals, and different ethnic populations. Despite this potential, Assam's economy is still predominantly agrarian, with a sizable section of the populace relying on agriculture and related industries that are frequently susceptible to flooding, seasonal unemployment, and unstable revenue. In this regard, rural tourism becomes a feasible substitute and additional revenue stream for rural households. ***(Government of India, Ministry of Tourism, 2015)***

Assam's problems with rural poverty, unemployment, poor infrastructure, and regional inequality have made sustainable economic growth a top priority. When promoted sustainably, rural tourism may support local business, create jobs, diversify the economy, and improve rural infrastructure. In addition, it promotes the preservation of cultural legacy and natural resources, making sure that economic expansion does not come at the expense of social unrest or environmental deterioration.

However, there are a number of obstacles to the growth of rural tourism in Assam, such as low awareness, poor infrastructure, little marketing, little community involvement, and gaps in policy implementation. A thorough and analytical investigation is required to determine how rural tourism contributes to the state's sustainable economic growth, pinpoint current obstacles, and analyze its overall effects on local economies and rural livelihoods.

Statement of the Problem:

Assam's abundant natural resources, varied cultural heritage, traditional lifestyles, and picturesque rural landscapes make it a promising destination for rural tourism. In addition to creating jobs, rural tourism may diversify rural revenue streams, encourage local entrepreneurship, and support sustainable economic growth. Despite these benefits, Assam's rural tourism industry is still relatively undeveloped, and its potential to boost the state's rural economy is still unrealized.

Assam's rural economy, which is primarily based on agriculture, suffers a number of difficulties, including seasonal unemployment, low income levels, poverty, poor infrastructure, and regular natural disasters like floods. There is little empirical data to evaluate rural tourism's true economic impact and

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sustainability in the Assam setting, despite the fact that it is frequently pushed as an alternative development method to address these problems. Studies that are now available typically concentrate on tourist development in general, paying little attention to rural tourism as a unique and community-based strategy for sustainable economic growth.

Furthermore, issues like inadequate planning, inadequate infrastructure, little marketing and promotion, low community involvement, a lack of qualified labor, and poor stakeholder coordination impede the implementation of rural tourism efforts in Assam. These limitations make it unclear if rural tourism is indeed promoting sustainable economic growth or if it is only operating in a dispersed and unsustainable way.

Policymakers and planners lack trustworthy data and insights to create sustainable rural tourist development strategies in the absence of thorough analytical investigations. Thus, the issue is figuring out how much rural tourism contributes to Assam's sustainable economic development, figuring out the obstacles to its expansion, and assessing its effects on the economy, society, and environment.

Review Literature:

1. Thomas, (2002), main forces behind economic expansion, community development, and the reduction of poverty in the world's developing nations is rural tourism. The study, which was carried out in South Africa, discovered that tourism had increased dramatically and had a positive effect on the country's rural regions' economic development. The report claims that rural tourism in South Africa aids in economic growth, the eradication of poverty, and the correction of income disparities within rural communities.
2. Brown (2003) focused on research on rural tourism in the United States, while some studies from other countries are also included. The author has discovered several studies that emphasize the crucial role that rural tourism may play in sustainable livelihood and that describe the potential advantages in terms of pure economics, such as by mentioning how tourism affects local tax revenues, employment produced, or income contributed. He has discovered that certain research highlights how tourism can improve quality of life issues, such as improving local cultural facilities, strengthening regional conservation efforts, or giving rural communities a stronger sense of place.
3. According to Haldar (2007) In addition to fostering social integration and global understanding, highlighted rural tourism will emerge as a crucial tool for sustainable development, including poverty alleviation, job creation, environmental regeneration, development of remote areas, and advancement of women and other underprivileged groups in the nation. To ensure sustainable economic growth and constructive social transformation, the government should support rural tourism.
4. OECD, (2007), according to a recent OECD assessment, "the major players represent less than 10% of the tourism enterprises but account for more than half of total turnover in the sector and for a significant proportion of employment" in the global tourism sector. It is acknowledged that six huge organizations dominate between 60 and 70 percent of the overall tourism industry in South Africa, despite the fact that small tourism businesses make up over 95 percent of all businesses in the country.
5. Cornelissen, (2005), research from throughout the world indicates that SMEs may play a significant role in the growth and development of tourism. Furthermore, encouraging the growth of small tourism businesses ought to be essential to the advancement of "responsible tourism" in rural regions.
6. Farooq et al (2012), The creation of jobs and income levels are directly positively impacted by tourism. Individual economic gain is increased, traditional resource-use systems are encouraged to

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be improvised, local natural resources are turned into commodities, and rural areas are transformed into growing hubs for resource allocation.

7. Kakkar & Sapna (2012), have conducted research on the effects of tourism on the Indian economy, with a primary focus on how innovation and the creation of value for tourists are making India a worldwide tourist destination. They have discovered that the travel and tourism sector significantly contributes to the creation of jobs and GDP growth in the nation.

Objectives of the Study:

The study has been taken up with the following objectives.

1. To study the composition and growth trends of tourist inflow to Assam over the past decade, with special emphasis on rural tourism.
2. To explore and examine the major challenges faced by tourists and rural tourism service providers in Assam.
3. To assess the role of rural tourism as a catalyst for sustainable economic development in rural Assam and to suggest suitable measures for strengthening its impact.

Methodology:

The majority of the materials used in this study were gathered from secondary sources. Both published and unpublished sources, such as books, journals, reports, unpublished doctorate theses, relevant websites, etc., are the primary sources of the data. An overview of the pattern and makeup of the influx of tourists into Assam has been obtained from secondary data from the Assam government's tourism department.

Significance of the Study:

The study is important from an academic, policy, and socioeconomic perspective since it examines how rural tourism contributes to Assam's sustainable economic growth. Despite its wide rural landscapes, rich cultural legacy, and wealth of natural resources, Assam nevertheless struggles with issues including rural poverty, unemployment, and a lack of economic diversification. The study's emphasis on rural tourism illustrates a different approach to development that combines sustainability, community involvement, and economic progress.

From an academic standpoint, the study adds to the body of knowledge on tourism-led development by offering a targeted examination of rural tourism within the Assam setting. Although tourism has been extensively researched, there is still a dearth of studies that explicitly look at rural tourism as a means of promoting sustainable economic development in Assam. By combining economic, social, and environmental factors, this study closes this research gap and provides a thorough analytical framework that may be helpful to future researchers and academics.

Because it offers empirical insights into the economic effects of rural tourism on rural livelihoods, job creation, and local entrepreneurship, the study is especially important for planners and policymakers. The results can help government organizations create efficient policies, upgrade infrastructure, boost community involvement, and guarantee the sustainable execution of rural tourist projects in Assam by highlighting obstacles and limitations in the growth of rural tourism.

The study highlights how rural tourism may foster inclusive growth from a developmental and socioeconomic perspective by giving rural communities especially women, youth, and marginalized groups opportunities to generate revenue. It emphasizes how rural tourism may boost local economies, lessen reliance on agriculture, and preserve traditional culture and history.

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Results and Discussion:

Assam's Current Tourism Situation:

Although the state has long welcomed tourists, tourism didn't really take off until the Directorate of Tourism of Assam was established in 1959. This department has achieved significant advancements in this field since 1959. The following table displays the overall number of visitors to Assam, their makeup from 2009–10 to 2018–19, and the money made. ***(Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam, 2019.***

Table 1: Trend and Makeup of Visitor Inflow and Revenue Gathering from

Sl. No	Year	No. of Tourists Inflow		Revenue (Rs. in Lakh)
		Domestic	Foreigner	
1	2009-10	3895525	14694	131.63
2	2010-11	4127447	15585	143.6
3	2011-12	4408336	16660	184.49
4	2012-13	4544666	17708	248.19
5	2013-14	4444393	19086	191.32
6	2014-15	4863826	20005	211.77
7	2015-16	5642950	26320	1057.24
8	2016-17	5413877	28419	252.39
9	2017-18	5934394	31739	1289.64
10	2018-19	6027002	41209	1391.2

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Govt. of Assam.

The aforementioned table shows that both the quantity of visitors and the money received from them fluctuate. These numbers show that overseas visitors to Assam are far fewer than domestic ones. Even though Assam's tourism industry has been growing, it was not included in the list of India's top ten states for both domestic and foreign visitors. Therefore, it wouldn't be incorrect to say that Assam hasn't had much success in the tourism sector. The growth trend of the influx of international visitors shows that the trend has continued to rise. However, it should be mentioned that the increase has been relatively less than the influx of domestic tourists. The development of tourism attractions has undoubtedly contributed to the increase of foreign tourists. For them, Kaziranga is still a popular travel destination. However, more upgrades are needed at the tourist destinations to boost their quantity.

Tourism and Economic Development:

Both at the individual farmer level and more broadly in the local community, rural tourism has significantly increased rural incomes. It has provided additional revenue and intersectoral connections; however it hasn't always replaced agricultural revenue. In order to create jobs and support sustainable lives through the promotion of art, craft, culture, heritage, handlooms, etc., rural tourism was designated as a focus area in the national tourist policy that was adopted in 2002. Although there are many different kinds of rural tourism, it is frequently confused with "farm tourism." In an attempt to draw in more visitors, Assam villages have combined their hospitality with traditional farming methods to create a potent brew known as "Farm Tourism," which is a relatively new tourism offering. Assam is particularly well-known for its tea, polu, muga, and bamboo. A significant portion of their output comes from Assam. As a state that is mostly focused on agriculture, Assam has enormous potential to grow farm tourism significantly with little further investment, which might boost the state's economy. In addition to the aforementioned, a variety of other activities are carried out here, such as fishing, forestry, and gardening. ***(Sharma & Dutta, 2017)***

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Rural tourism in Assam thrives with women leading the way

Source: https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/travel/women-are-at-the-forefront-of-rural-tourism-initiatives-in-assam-district-101666529594330.html

Since its discovery in Assam in 1823, tea has grown to be a vital component of the state's economy. There are over 1000 of these verdant green tea plantations in Assam, each of which is a treasure trove of exotic natural beauty with vibrant people and their captivating songs and dances, expansive bungalows, and residential facilities. There are golf courses and polo grounds in several of these tea gardens. These amenities can combine to create what is now known as "tea tourism," an alluring travel package in rural Assam. In addition to agricultural pursuits, a variety of non-agricultural pursuits, such as handlooms, textiles, sericulture, and products made from cane, bamboo, bell metal, and brassware, have contributed to the growth of rural tourism by educating both domestic and foreign visitors about Assam culture and history. Once more, producers can make a substantial profit by selling these goods straight to tourists. Farm-based rural tourism has a sizable potential market in Assam, particularly for foreign visitors. The urban population with village roots has long been curious about the origins of food, plants and animals, raw materials like wood, handicrafts, languages, culture, customs, clothing, and rural way of life. This population segment's curiosity can be satiated by rural tourism in Assam, which focuses on farmers, local culture, and agriculture.

Assam's rural regions have a lot of potential to draw travelers looking for genuine natural treasures. Assam's biogeographic diversity is well-known. Assam offers essentially nature-centric tourism due to its deep woods, uneven topography, flora and fauna, the magnificent Brahmaputra and its tributaries, wildlife sanctuaries, and numerous rare and endangered animal species. Ayurveda is a natural medicine that originated in rural areas. Assam woodlands are home to a variety of therapeutic plants. Additionally, it communicates the possibility of drawing tourists to the hamlet. State revenue is boosted by tourism. Both domestic and foreign travelers make up a sizable portion since they create demand for products and services that would not have been created or produced in the past, such as lodging, contemporary airports, hotels, lodges, etc. In addition to increasing government revenue, this would promote investment.

Assam's Current Tourism Promotion Challenges Include:

Even in the domestic market, the region has failed to capitalize on its enormous potential for tourism. While in case of India, many States have demonstrated the requisite urgency to push tourism as a major business, Assam seems to take a backseat and is oblivious of its vast tourism potential granted by nature and harnesses it in a sustainable manner. ***(Das, 2016)*** However, there are a number of reasons why this

Insufficient Infrastructure: The rise of tourism in the state has been hampered by a number of factors, including hilly and hostile terrain, porous borders, extremely bad road connections, extremely poor transportation connectivity, limited air services, inadequate rail connections, weak telecommunication

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infrastructure, etc. Approach roads are in poor shape, and the majority of tourist destinations are not near national highways. This is a powerful deterrent that prevents a healthy influx of tourists. The anticipated growth and promotion of tourism in the state has been hampered, in addition to the infrastructure bottleneck, by poor food quality, a lack of well-planned package tours, a polluted environment, poor service at hotels and guest houses, a lack of amenities like good hotels and tourist lodges, an inexpensive and dependable communication network, etc.

Insurgency: The media frequently ignores the region's innovative development initiatives in favor of concentrating on ethnic conflicts and the state's underdevelopment. The media has ingrained in the public's perception that the only noteworthy events occurring in the area are acts of violence, bombings, kidnappings, extortions, etc. Given the current state of law and order, both local and foreign tourists see traveling to this region of the nation as dangerous.

Lack of Tourist Guides: There are essentially no qualified tour guides stationed at significant tourist destinations in Assam. As a result, there is scarcely anyone to quench the tourists' curiosity when they arrive at such a location. A program to train tour guides was started by the Department of Tourism. The majority of the trainees quit their jobs, hence the endeavor did not provide positive results. Due to the limited number of visitors visiting the state, some of them were able to find alternative sources of income, while others found it to be less lucrative.

Insufficient Coordination: When it comes to managing visitor needs in locations of historical and religious significance, there is a noticeable lack of coordination between various agencies, such as the Department of Tourism and the Department of Archaeology. Almost no coordination exists between the Department of Tourism or the Assam Tourist Development Corporation (ATDC) and several public and commercial sectors, such as the coal, oil, and tea industries. This is undoubtedly a significant obstacle for the travel and tourism sector.

Underdeveloped Human Resources: The lack of training among tour operators, hoteliers, transporters, tour guides, and others prevents them from giving visitors comprehensive knowledge about the area, which is clearly a hindrance to the growth of Assam's tourism sector. Therefore, despite the state's abundance of natural beauty, the number of visitors has been minimal due to a lack of infrastructure and other relevant amenities in the state's tourist destinations.

Methods for Encouraging Assam Rural Tourism:

The Union Tourism Ministry has been releasing more Central aid for tourism development in an effort to promote this State as a tourist destination. Additionally, the government has pushed young people to work in this field. But the government's persistent promise to turn the state into a paradise for tourists has not yet come to pass. The audacious measures that the government occasionally proposes must be adopted and carried out in a more methodical and structured way. The large budgetary grants given to the Assam tourism sector should be transparent and accountable because without accountability, there won't be any responsibility, and without responsibility, policies and programs won't be properly implemented. Therefore, the government should take steps to increase the rate of investment in tourism facilities in order to construct new industrial parks, special economic zones, airports, etc. with all necessary infrastructures. ***(Baruah, 2018)***

However, with financial support from both the State Government and the Government of India, the State Tourism Department has had significant success and overall development in recent years, including infrastructure construction and other facilities. Particular focus has been placed on public-private partnerships in order to take advantage of untapped potential avenues for the tourist sector's growth. It is worth mentioning that the Tatas have chosen to build the first five-star hotel in the northeast, Vivanta by Taj, which will surely draw a large number of foreign visitors. Additionally, the Department has launched ambitious employment-generating initiatives like the "Assam Bikash Yojana" to give local educated youths without jobs financial support so they can become self-sufficient and

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participate in tourism-related activities like transportation, wayside amenities, food kiosks, restaurants, dhabas and lodging in cottages, among other things. Additionally, the department established training facilities for drivers who lead jeep safaris in national parks.

Thus, tourism can be regarded as a key industry for Assam's economic growth. The following suggestions can be made to enhance the influence of rural tourism as a potential instrument for rural development:

- Assam's general goal of economic and social development must be blended with the preparation of master plans with specific aims.
- To increase tourism's contribution to socioeconomic development and poverty alleviation, government action is required.
- Appropriate coordination and oversight between different tourism bodies and agencies.
- Public-private partnerships and private sector partnerships ought to be included.
- Appropriate infrastructure development, tourism amenities, improved communication networks, etc.
- Improvement of the media's tourism promotion function.
- Assam rural tourism should have enough facilities provided by the state government.
- To loosen the Restricted Area Permit (RAP) regime, states should establish interstate circuits.

Analysis of the Research and Results:

For travelers, Assam is a paradise. Along with its enchanting hills, dancing rivers, roaring waterfalls, thick and dark forests, heavy rains during the monsoon, countless species of flora and fauna, mysterious clouds, melodious folk music, thrilling dances and festivals, a variety of delectable dishes, handlooms and handicrafts, and most importantly, its verdant landscape that has drawn people from all over the world for ages, this state is home to numerous communities, cultures, and religions. Millions of people have been captivated by Assam's aura of myths, mystery, music, mountains, and all the natural wonders. Even though there are historical and religious sites that draw tourists, Assam tourism is fundamentally nature-centric due to the unreserved bounty of nature. However, it still draws very few visitors. ***(Nath, 2015)***

Major Findings of the Study:

1. Rural tourism creates a variety of revenue streams for rural households. Research indicates that in Assam, rural tourism generates additional revenue beyond agriculture through homestays, handicrafts, hospitality services, and cultural experiences. This helps boost local earnings and lessen reliance on farming alone.
2. Tourism-related activities increase employment opportunities: Studies show that rural tourism considerably lowers rural unemployment by generating both direct jobs (such as guides, homestay hosts, and transportation services) and indirect occupations (such as food supply, craftspeople, and transportation).
3. Rural tourism contributes to cultural preservation by encouraging communities to preserve and exhibit their cultural history through visitors' participation in local festivals, crafts, and customs. This promotes both cultural pride and economic advantages.
4. Tourism increases consumer demand for local goods. Assam's rural tourism increases sales of handlooms, handicrafts, and agricultural products by putting tourists in direct contact with farmers and craftsmen. This increases the opportunity for local micro-entrepreneurs to make a living.

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5. Higher living standards from tourism-related income: Research shows that rural households involved in tourism frequently have greater access to infrastructure and services, such as health, education, and municipal services, thanks to higher income.
6. Tourism helps reduce poverty and sustain livelihoods: Research indicates that rural tourism helps reduce poverty by providing alternatives to seasonal agricultural income, diversifying sources of income, and generating steady incomes.
7. Local communities benefit from increased capacity and skills: Tourism helps rural locals strengthen their communication, hospitality, and small business management abilities, which increases employability and encourages entrepreneurial mindsets.
8. The need for better roads, connection, and local facilities is highlighted by increased visitor inflows, which drive policy support and community activities that promote broader rural development.
9. There are still issues with sustainable implementation. Research shows that inadequate planning, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of marketing, and inadequate training hinders the expansion of tourism; therefore, efforts must be strategically coordinated to ensure long-term sustainability.
10. Tourism promotes community-based and participatory development: Analytical assessments highlight the inclusive advantages and increased local agency in development decisions that result from local communities actively participating in tourism planning and management.

Conclusion:

A vibrant sector of the economy, tourism links people worldwide, encourages cross-cultural communication, and develops understanding. When it comes to generating income and creating jobs, it is one of the biggest industries in the world. Rural and nature-based tourism has gained popularity in recent years since it not only draws tourists but also gives local communities new revenue streams. ***Bhattacharya, 2016)***

Assam has enormous potential for growing a number of tourist-related industries, including ecotourism, cultural tourism, agrotourism, and religious tourism, because to its abundant natural beauty, varied cultural legacy, and distinctive agro-based resources. Assam can be positioned as a globally renowned tourist destination through strategic planning and appropriate policy execution, boosting economic growth and generating new job possibilities. For the tourism industry to grow sustainably and inclusively, local communities must actively participate in government programs. ***(Saikia & Deka, 2018)***

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