

# 8 Tourism in Assam: Status and Prospects

## 8.1 Introduction

1. North-East India is a paradise for tourists. Its enchanting hills, dancing rivers, roaring waterfalls, thick and dark forests, heavy rains during monsoon, innumerable varieties of flora and fauna, countless species of wild animals and plants, mysterious clouds, melodious folk music, thrilling dances and festivals, variety of many delicious dishes, handlooms and handicrafts, and above all its green landscape used to attract people from different parts of the world since time immemorial. Assam, one of the constituent states of the region, an embodiment of the natural beauty and grace, a true representative of the region, has been at the centrestage of tourist attraction. The recorded history tells that since the days of Hieu-en Tsang, the great Chinese traveller, who came to Assam during the reign of Kumar Bhaskar Burman (594-650 AD), Assam has been fascinating millions of people by its aura of myths, mystery, music, mountains, nay, all the gifts of nature. The ungrudging blessings of nature have made tourism in Assam essentially nature-centric, despite the fact there are historical and religious places of tourist attraction.
2. Tourism has generated employment in different parts of the country. Besides creating opportunities for tourist guides, conducted tours, establishment of hotels, and so many other avenues in the tertiary sector, tourism can be a major source of employment in Assam. It is argued that every domestic tourist can generate direct and indirect employment of three persons, and this can be higher (seven) in the case of inflow of every foreign tourist. It is also projected that every one million rupees invested in tourism, 47.9 direct jobs can be created, besides, of course, creating more avenues for indirect employment. Yet paradoxically it attracts very few tourists. Why? What can we do about it?

## 8.2 Tourism Potential

### 8.2.1 Existing places of tourist attraction

3. As stated already, tourism in Assam is essentially nature based, therefore, natural parks and sanctuaries, rivers, lakes, warm water springs, forests, wild life, are the principal components of tourist attraction. These places can be grouped together under four categories: (a) nature-related, (b) historical, (c) religious and (d) others.

**(a) Nature related:**

| Places in alphabetic order | Distance from Guwahati in km | Speciality   |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| 1. Bhairabkunda            | 137                          | A beautiful place at the border of Arunachal Pradesh   |
| 2. Bhalukpong              | 205                          | A beautiful place by the side of river Jia Bhoroli, famous for angling and water sports  |
| 3. Chandubi                | 64                           | A natural lagoon, beautiful picnic spot  |
| 4. Dibru-Chaikhowa         | 490                          | 70 km from Dibrugarh, national park, the habitat of elephants, buffaloes, famous for wild horses   |
| 5. Haflong                 | 355                          | One of the hill stations in Assam with unsurpassed sylvan beauty   |
| 6. Jatinga                 | 364                          | Near Haflong, North Cachar district, a beautiful hilly place, where birds behave in a mysterious way, the local people call that the birds commit suicide here on certain specific days  |
| 7. Kaziranga               | 217                          | Internationally famous national park, the home of great Indian one-horn rhinoceros, tigers, elephants, buffaloes, deer, wild ducks and geese, breeding place of pelicans, habitat of reptiles and monkeys more particularly golden langurs and host of other species |
| 8. Manas                   | 176                          | Situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, one of the magnificent national parks in the country, the Manas river flows through it, famous for the tiger project, a habitat for various wild animals   |
| 9. Orang                   | 150                          | A wild life sanctuary, known as a miniature Kaziranga  |
| 10. Pabitara               | 65                           | A wild life sanctuary  |
| 11. Potasoli               | 173                          | 38 km from historic town of Tezpur, near the picturesque river Jia Bhoroli, famous for eco-camp set up jointly by the Department of Forest and Assam Anglers Association   |

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Guwahati

**Wildlife**

- An attractive feature of the Assam's forestry is its colourful wildlife. Some of species are exclusive to the state. Assam is famous for as the home of one-horned rhinoceros. Some of the endangered species found in the state are hollock gibbon, the stamp tailed macaque, the capped langur, the golden langur, the pigmy hog, the clouded leopard, the golden cat, the white winged wood-duck, and the like. All these can make Assam as one of the best destination of the tourists.
- There are five National Parks and eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries for protection and preservation of wildlife in the state. The five National Parks – Kaziranga, Manas, Nameri, Orang and Dibru-Saikhowa covers an area of 1561.14 sq km. The total area covered by eleven wildlife and bird sanctuaries is 492.97 sq km.

6. The Assam National Park Act, 1968 was enacted for the preservation and protection of flora and fauna in the wildlife parks and sanctuaries. The Assam Forest Protection Force Act, 1986 was enacted for better protection and security of the forest produce. However, the state of affair in the Forest Protection Force is sad. This is testified to by the fact that the endangered species like rhinoceros are the regular victims of human lust and there is hardly any visible preventive measure to stop such acts of poaching. The forest guards are still with outdated equipment to counter the poacher with sophisticated arms.

**(b) Religious**

| Places in alphabetic order | Distance from Guwahati in km | Speciality   |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| 1. Barpeta                 | 137                          | Famous for a Vaishnava monastery   |
| 2. Batadrawa               | 134                          | Birth place of Shri Sankardeva, the Vaishnava reformer, saint and a great literary figure  |
| 3. Hajo                    | 35                           | Sacred place for Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists   |
| 4. Kamakhya                |                              | An important religious place of the Hindus within the city of Guwahati, on the top of Nilachal hill, attracts thousands of devotees and other tourists every day by its natural grandeur               |
| 5. Madan Kamdev            | 35                           | Vast archeological ruins of fine erotic sculpture  |
| 6. Majuli                  | 326                          | The largest river island in the world, centre of Vaishnava culture, seat of many satras which are known as the centres of Assamese art, dance, drama, music, a safe heaven for various migratory birds |
| 7. Surya Pahar             | 162                          | Situated on a hill surrounded by innumerable statues of Durga Devi, Ganesha, Surya, Chandra, Buddha  |

**(c) Historical**

| Places in alphabetic order | Distance from Guwahati in km | Specialty   |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Digboi                  | 523                          | Famous for the first oil refinery in Asia, war cemetery of World War II                         |
| 2. Sibsagar                | 369                          | Seat of the Ahom rule, famous for royal palaces, monuments, temples and massive ponds           |
| 3. Tezpur                  | 137                          | Ruins of an ancient capital of the Mahabharata time, famous for the love story of Usha-Anirudha |

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Guwahati

**(d) Others**

7. **Guwahati:** Situated on the bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra, it is a fast growing metropolis. Though unplanned, it is the gateway to the North-East India. It is well connected with the rest of India by rail, road and air. The airport, known as Gopinath Bordoloi airport, is being upgraded to an international one. The places of worth visiting are: the famous Shakti

temple of mother Goddess Kamakhya on the Nilachal hills, the ancient Siva temple Umananda situated on the Peacock island in the middle of the river Brahmaputra, the Navagraha temple, Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Balaji temple, Science Museum, Vaisisthashram (founded by famous sage Vaisistha amidst grand natural beauty), the State Museum, the State Zoo-cum-Botanical garden, the Saraighat Bridge, the Lachit Barphukan Park etc.

8. Sualkushi: 32 km from Guwahati, known as the silk town of Assam, it is famous for Assamese silk, muga (golden thread) and other varieties of silk.

### **Potential to Attract Tourists of Diverse Interests**

9. The above list shows that there is an ample scope for tourism to grow as an industry in with it diverse endowments of tourist interests. The following are the existing and potential variety of tourism:

#### **a. Nature Tourism**

10. Assam and its six neighbouring states of the North-East are known for their bio-geographic richness (Coopers and Lybrand Report, 1996, p. 49). With its dense forests, uneven topography, flora and fauna, the majestic Brahmaputra and its tributaries, wild life sanctuaries like Kaziranga, Manas, Pabitara, Dibru-Saikhowa, Bhalukpong, Pabitara and similar others, and many rare species of animals, Assam offers basically nature-centric tourism. From one end to the other, the state offers to the tourists so many places of natural beauty with wide variety of wildlife that very few places in the world can compete with it. Nature tourism understood in terms of wildlife sanctuaries constitutes the core of tourism in Assam. The tourists, both domestic and foreign, are likely to find these places attracting, nay alluring, provided a well-definite programme of action is evolved.

#### **b. Tea Tourism**

11. Tea was first discovered in Assam in 1823 by two intrepid British adventurers, Robert and Charles Bruce and since then tea has become an integral part of Assam's economy. Each of these lush green tea gardens in Assam (about 1000 in number) is a treasure house of exotic beauty of nature with colourful people and their enchanting songs and dances, sprawling bungalows, and residential facilities. Many of these tea gardens have polo fields and golf courses. There are as many as 30 air strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. These facilities can form into an attractive package for tourism. The road communication to most of the tea gardens is fairly well maintained, and the rest houses and bungalows with modern facilities located there are generally kept ready for visitors and guests. Therefore, coordination with the management of the tea gardens can effectively do a lot in promoting tea tourism in the state. It may be noted that tea tourism is a recent concept, its potentiality, remains unexplored.

### **c. Eco-tourism**

12. Eco-tourism is also a new concept, developed around the idea of travelling to places of natural beauty, moving around and staying with the places of nature for a couple of days. It has the twin objectives of conserving environment and improving the welfare of the local people. Countries like Kenya, Costa Rica, South Africa have already successfully promoted eco-tourism. Kerala presents a unique success story of eco-tourism in our country. On this similar line, Assam has immense scope for eco-tourism, as its natural scenario and climatic condition resemble those in Kerala. The state is virtually free from industrial pollution. Its green forests, blue hills, enchanting rivers are the basis on which an eco-friendly tourism can be developed. For that a host of matters to be properly addressed, including: (a) development of good approach road to the spots of tourist attraction, (b) creation of infra-structural facilities like good quality tents with provisions for food and other logistics, (c) river cruising and water sports, bird watching towers etc. These facilities are likely to attract eco-tourists. It may be noted that eco-tourism is yet to come to the take-off stage.

### **d. Cultural Tourism**

13. Assam is a conglomeration of various ethnic tribes and groups each having a distinct language, culture, way-of-life, festivals, songs and dances. Most of these people have their spring festivals. Songs and dances, display of colourful dresses, tasting of innumerable varieties of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes mark these festivals. Sankardev Kalakhetra, Guwahati, has been organising, in recent years, spring festivals, on the line of the desert festival of Rajasthan, the Rangali Utsav in the month of April in which the various colourful shades of Assam are presented. This could be as big an attraction as the Pushkar Mela in Rajasthan.

### **e. Pilgrim Tourism**

14. Assam has many ancient temples and shrines, some of which like Kamakhya date back to pre-historic time. As stated already Kamakhya is one of the most revered religious places in the country. An average of 1000 visitors visit the Kamakhya temple every day throughout the year. It becomes a centre of attraction in the month of June when it celebrates the Ambubchi mela. At that time more than hundred thousand pilgrims come for pilgrimage from different places of India. Situated on a hill top Kamakhya is also a very beautiful place that attracts many tourists. There are other religious places where visitors often come from different parts of the country. But most of the places do not provide adequate facilities to the tourists and pilgrims, for which these places of religious importance fail to attract a large number of tourists.

#### f. Adventure Tourism

15. The enchanting blue hills and speedy rivers of Assam provide an enormous scope for the development of adventure tourism. Recently, some of the adventure sports activities like rock-climbing, trekking, para-sailing, water sports, river rafting and angling are promoted by the Department of Tourism. There is an annual angling competition held at Bhalukpong-Potasali side every year in November in which Indian and foreign tourists participate. But other areas of adventure tourism like hang gliding are yet to grow. Assam has a number of ideal places like Nilachal hills (where the Kamakhya temple situated) in the city of Guwahati and the hills around Kaziranga. Since most of the tourists come to the state through Guwahati and visit Kaziranga, there is an enormous scope for hang gliding.

#### g. Golf Tourism

16. There are about 10 golf courses located mostly within the compact areas of tea gardens. The Oil India maintains a very good golf course in the industrial town of Duliajan. These offer a unique opportunity to develop golf tourism in the state. Most of the courses are located near to air-strips and helipads maintained by the tea garden management. In recent years, domestic and foreign tourists are coming to play golf in different golf courses, and a good number of them use these air-strips and helipads. Golf tourism can be integrated with eco and tea tourism. One has to recognize that some tourists may more than one interest and may like to combine various aspects of tourism described above.

### 8.3 Status of Tourism

17. In a recent statement, Mr M P Bezbaruah, Union Tourism Secretary, said that the inflow of foreign tourists in India has registered a 6 per cent growth in 2000-01. The absolute figure is 2.7 million people from abroad. Foreign tourists fetched \$3 billion to the Union exchequer making tourism the second highest net foreign exchange earner in the country.

18. However, Assam does not present a happy picture. Only 0.22 percent of the foreign tourists visiting India last year made Assam their destination. Table 8.1 presents the inflow of both domestic and foreign tourists to Assam:

**Table 8.1: Tourist Inflow to Assam 1995-2000**

| Year | Indian    | Foreign |
|------|-----------|---------|
| 1995 | 348,532   | 2,575   |
| 1996 | 327,260   | 5,885   |
| 1997 | 842,656   | 4,194   |
| 1998 | 939,721   | 3,843   |
| 1999 | 964,939   | 5,218   |
| 2000 | 1,001,577 | 5,959   |

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Assam

19. It is noteworthy that the tourists visit Assam throughout the year. But the peak period starts from October when the rainy season comes to an end, the climate becomes more pleasant and the national parks like Kaziranga are opened for the visitors. The peak period continues till April when the national parks are closed due to rain and other accompanying problems. The figures stated in Table 8.1 include only those who visited the places listed in the directory of Tourism and stayed at tourist lodges of the State Tourism Department, hotels, inspection bungalows and Kamakhya Temple's accommodation. The revenue earned for last four financial years are stated in Table 8.2.

**Table 8.2: Revenue Earned from Tourists (Rs '000)**

| Year      | Directorate of Tourism | ATDC <sup>@</sup> | Total |
|-----------|------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| 1996-97   | 3,688                  | NA                | 3,688 |
| 1997-98   | 2,743                  | 1,972             | 4,715 |
| 1998-99   | 3,105                  | 1,979             | 5,084 |
| 1999-2000 | 3,172                  | 3,226             | 6,398 |

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Assam

<sup>@</sup> Assam Tourism Development Corporation

20. It is evident from the two Tables that there has been some increase in tourist traffic as also in the revenue earning from tourism despite the fact the law and order situation in the state has not been satisfactory and insurgency activities are rife. These data, however, do not present an idea about the spillover revenue and employment generation in the state. They also do not indicate an idea about the income and employment generated in the tertiary sectors associated with tourism.

#### **8.4 What has ailed Assam's tourism?**

21. Despite the fact that Assam has the potentiality of developing tourism in a big way, the statistics shown in Tables 8.1 and 8.2 do not present a happy situation. The reasons are manifold.

##### **a. Absence of a Tourism Policy**

22. The Government of India has a policy to develop tourism into an industry and a target to achieve in respect of attracting foreign tourists, who constitute an important source of hard foreign currency. As a result, process tourism has become the second largest foreign exchange earner. It has taken steps to revise the National Tourism Policy, 1982 and to redraft the draft policy of 1993 to envision global tourism based on four S – Swagat (welcome), Suvidha (facilities), Soosna (information) and Suraksha (security). It is said that Assam has a policy on tourism prepared in November 1987. Unfortunately, it is not available in any of the offices connected with tourism. It appears that there was an attempt in November 1987 to formulate a tourism policy and then in December 1992 an exercise was done to frame certain

rules on tourism. It appears that these steps did not bring forth any concrete result. The media, in the recent time has been giving adequate publicity highlighting the importance of tourism in the economic development of the state. Most of the newspapers in both English and Assamese, have been publishing a good number articles in frequent intervals highlighting various aspects of tourism and its potentiality in the sustainable development of Assam. Ideas on this matter are generated through media, but these are yet to be crystallized and institutionalized, as result tourism remains in the domain of ad hocism.

#### **b. Restricted Area Permit (RAP)**

23. The RAP to the North-Eastern region was enforced in 1955 in the backdrop of alleged missionary involvement in the Naga rebellion. Under this a foreigner intending to visit North-East including Assam had to undergo a long arduous procedure of obtaining permission from the Home Ministry. With RAP in force till May 18, 1999 it was an uphill task for any foreign tourist to visit Assam and other places in the North-East. Unfortunately, the ghost of RAP still continues to loom large and the efforts to disabuse the false apprehension in the mind of the foreign tourists are minimal.

#### **c. Insurgency**

24. Assam, and for that matter almost whole of North-East, has been experiencing violent movements, some of which are secessionists in nature, since 1953 when A Z Phizo fired the first salvo of armed struggle against Indian Union. The foreign and the domestic tourists consider it risky to visit this part of the country, in view of the prevailing law and order situation. The general impression has been that any foreign or domestic tourist could be a soft target of the insurgents. Therefore, they are reluctant to undertake an adventurous journey to Assam and North-East. Contrary to this general impression, however, there is not a single instance of harassment, not to speak of threat to life to any domestic or foreign tourists visiting the region since the outbreak of the Naga movement. But the general impression about the deteriorating law and order situation is enough to ward off any tourist. On the top of this, Manas sanctuary, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful natural parks in the country has been virtually under the control of the Bodo militants for which it is still not considered to safe to visit the place. Recently, Manas has been opened for the tourists, but it will take time to ward off the long-standing impression of the tourists about the sanctuary.

#### **d. Lack of Infrastructure**

25. To attract tourists, there must be dissemination of information, infrastructural facilities like good hotels and tourist lodges, affordable and reliable communication network, clean and hygienic food and accommodation, availability of water sports equipment, and the like. Most of the places of tourist attraction are not by the side of the national highways, and approach roads are in bad condition. This is a strong discouraging factor, which works against a good



inflow of the tourist. It appears that the potentialities for developing tourism to a stable source of revenue are not matched by proper policy and strategy.

#### **e. Lack of Coordinated Efforts**

26. There is a palpable lack of coordination among several agencies like Department of Tourism and Department of Archaeology in handling the demands of the tourists in places of both historic and religious importance. There is virtually no coordination between various public industries and private sectors like tea industry, oil and coal on one hand, and the Department of Tourism or Assam Tourist Development Corporation (ATDC), on the other, in the efforts towards developing eco and tea tourism. Similarly, there is no tangible and effective coordination between the twin bodies of Assam tourism, that is, the Directorate of Tourism and ATDC on one hand, and road and river transport system run by both Government and private sectors on the other. Therefore, stagnation has been the striking mark of the status of tourism in Assam.

#### **f. Absence of Tourist Guides**

27. Assam virtually does not have any trained guides placed in important places of tourist attraction. Consequently, as the tourists arrive at such a place there is hardly anyone to satisfy the inquisitiveness of the tourists. The Department of Tourism initiated a programme to train tourist guides. The effort did not yield good result as most of the trainees left the job. Some of them found other means of livelihood while others found it to be less paying because of the poor inflow of the tourists to the state. It is a chicken-and-egg syndrome which can be resolved by the state government by adopting a two-front strategy – (i) tourist guide training programme for a very limited number of youths, and (ii) setting a target of inflow of the tourists.

### **8.5 Recent Steps**

28. Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) was set up in June 1988 under the Companies Act of 1956 with the objective to boost tourism in the state. It took over most of the tourist lodges, tourist bungalows, hotels, guest houses, entertainment projects etc., all the means of transport which had been under the control of the Department of Tourism, Government of Assam, and many other functions performed by the said Department to market tourism in the state. Since then it has been making efforts in coordination with the Directorate of Tourism to promote tourism. It prepared an agenda to start as many as 25 new projects. Some of these have been already commissioned and some are in the process of completion. It is expected that ATDC will be able to reduce bureaucratic bungling standing on the way of promoting tourism in the state.
29. It is not out of context to refer to the fact that the ATDC has been earning profit during the last two financial years (See Table 8.3) although its track record was not quite satisfactory.

But if the recent phenomenal trend (profit from Rs 1.1 million to Rs 2 million, which accounts for 82 per cent increase) is maintained, it can definitely fulfill the objectives of the MOA (Memorandum of Association) of 1988.

**Table 8.3: ATDC's Net Profit (1994-95 to 1999-2000)**

| Financial Year | Net profit in Rs |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1994-95        | 700,000          |
| 1995-96        | 400,000          |
| 1996-97        | 1,100,000        |
| 1997-98        | 300,000          |
| 1998-99        | 1,100,000        |
| 1999-2000      | 2,000,000        |

Source: ATDC, Guwahati

30. Table 8.4 presents the ATDC's turn-over per employee for the last six years. It indicates that the ATDC is not a liability and has the potentiality of contributing to the economy of the state. The slump registered in two years (1997-98 and 1998-99) has been overtaken by the significant growth in 1999-2000.

**Table 8.4: Turnover per Employee**

| Financial year | Amount in Rupees |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1994-95        | 21,000           |
| 1995-96        | 38,000           |
| 1996-97        | 43,000           |
| 1997-98        | 34,000           |
| 1998-99        | 37,000           |
| 1999-2000      | 51,000           |

Source: ATDC, Guwahati

31. Table 8.5 gives an idea about the projects undertaken by the ATDC. It shows that its physical performance is not satisfactory. Out of 113 schemes carried over for last six years it has been able to complete only 45 schemes. It means that average two schemes have been completed in each financial year.

**Table 8.5: ATDC's Physical Performance**

| Financial year | No. of schemes sanctioned (cumulative) | No. of schemes completed (cumulative) |
|----------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1994-95        | 56                                     | 38                                    |
| 1995-96        | 61                                     | 40                                    |
| 1996-97        | 68                                     | 42                                    |
| 1997-98        | 79                                     | 42                                    |
| 1998-99        | 93                                     | 44                                    |
| 1999-2000      | 113                                    | 45                                    |

Source: ATDC, Guwahati

32. To attract tourists, Assam tourism has been organising tea-tourism and Rongali Utsav in the state as a part of its publicity campaign. These two mega events have been included in the national calendar of festival to get favourable response from both domestic and foreign tourists. These are very recent innovative steps, which are likely to succeed in attracting tourists, both domestic and foreign.
33. During the last four years, the ATDC and the Directorate of Tourism have participated in various fairs and festivals like Travel and Tourism Fair in Kolkata and Mumbai, India International and Tourism Expo in New Delhi, Hyderabad Fair, Darjeeling Tea Festival, International Fair at Udaipur, Investment Festival in Jaipur, Surajkund Craft Festival in Haryana, Kullu Festival in Himachal Pradesh etc. in the country. These two bodies also participated in international festival in Berlin in 1988 and 1999. It is premature to comment on the impact of such participation in terms of significant increase in the tourist inflow to the state.
34. Assam tourism had produced documentary films, colourful brochure, and stickers, besides creating a website [assamtourism.com](http://assamtourism.com). development as a part of the publicity campaign.

## 8.6 Strategy For the Future

35. It is generally believed that tourists, both domestic and foreign, visit different places in search of specialities, which include a variety of things, such as, beauties of nature, architecture, peace of mind and fulfilment in religious places, new and different variety of food, culture of the people and uncommon adventure. In the midst of so many varieties, tourists make certain common demands, and these are (i) clean, hygienic and comfortable living accommodation; (ii) good transport system to take them from one place to another; (iii) decent shops particularly catering to ethnic art, clothes, artifacts, and (iv) entertainment representing cultural heritage of the place (Report of the Advisory Committee on Industries, Vol. I, Assam, 1996, p. 22).
36. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Tourism: 1999-2000 also states that tourists invariably seek “a pleasant and delectable experience on their trips”. The most desired tourism product, the Report states, should consist of (a) an environment of peace and stability, (b) an assurance of safety and security, (c) an affable host society, (d) an industry and a government that provides the requisite service with a smile, (e) absence of extortion and hostility, and (f) accessible tourist attraction (p. 6).
37. Assam is richly endowed by nature to become a spotlight of tourism, but mere having a good number of attractive tourist spots is not enough unless all the minimum requirements stated above are not readily available.

38. The issue of promoting tourism, through which a major source of national revenue can be created and generated, cannot be handled in isolation. A multi-front strategy has to be developed to elevate it to the status of industry. The following points are advanced in this direction:

**a. State policy for Tourism:** A policy of tourism for the state of Assam has to be evolved on the line of National Policy of Tourism, which incorporates broad policy guidelines to attract both domestic and foreign tourists. The general principles recently announced by the Union Ministry of Tourism around four 'S' should form the core of the policy of Assam tourism.

**b. Fixation of Targets:** Certain targets should be fixed in respect of tourist inflow, infra-structural development, commissioning of new projects, annual revenue to be earned and employment to be generated.

**c. Publicity Drive:** Information about tourism in Assam should be made available in the embassies in New Delhi and diplomatic offices in major Indian cities. Colour pictures of large size depicting the natural beauty of Assam and its rich culture should be displayed in the national and international airports and the basic information about places of tourist attraction and the facilities available should be kept in special corners in the airports. The website created by Assam tourism should be updated giving all the details of information on tourism. It is pertinent to mention that Assam has to market tourism aggressively. "One will have to go out and sell, instead of waiting for the customers to come and buy" in a market of stiff competition. (Assam Beyond 2000, p. 64). Information about tourism in Assam should be made widely available including one on the internet.

**d. Infrastructure:** All the infrastructure connected with tourism such as good road communication, good hotels and safari resorts, water sports, tents and other logistics for eco-tourism should be developed. In Guwahati there are a few good hotels. But in other places of tourist attraction there should be good hotels and safari resorts with decent living conditions, if not five-star hotel standard. It is reported in the media that hotels and restaurants have been earning significant revenue in recent years. This tertiary sector needs greater attention.

**e. Facilities for the Tourists:** Tourism is known as a 'hospitality service' and it should ensure all possible facilities (Suvidha) to the tourists, who are to be treated as honoured guests. Apart from infrastructure, tourist information, travel services and trained guides are needed in Assam. The Government of Assam should initiate a tourist guide-training programme for a limited number of youths and upgrade the tourist information centres.

**f. Cultural programmes:** There should be provision for musical entertainment to the tourists staying in the hotels and tourists bungalows in important tourist places like Kaziranga and Guwahati, so that the evenings become delightful and the tourist can be enriched by the cultural contours of the region.

**g. Communication network:** Although most of the tourist places are not very far from the airports, the condition of most of the roads including the national highways is not satisfactory. The approach roads to most of the tourist spots are in deplorable condition. Absence of good roads to the places of tourist attraction is a discouraging factor. Efforts should be made to coordinate with the PWD (Roads) to improve the condition of the approach roads to the tourist spots on priority basis. Secondly, each tourist spot should have at least a PCO for facilitating the tourists to maintain their contact with the rest of the world. In this connection, it may be noted that the river Brahmaputra offers a scope for an eco-friendly river transport. The Techno-Economic Feasibility Study (1998-99) sponsored by the Union Ministry of Tourism confirms the viability of such a venture. The massive volume of water can be properly used to take tourist from one place to another by luxury cruisers. For example tourists might like to choose the river route to travel from Guwahati to Tezpur by a luxury cruisers.

**h. Coordination with various bodies and agencies:** The Directorate of Tourism, the ATDC, Department of Archaeology, tea garden management and the civil aviation should strive for coordinated efforts to promote tourism. The Directorate of Tourism and the ATDC have mutual coordination and frequent meetings but they do not have proper coordination with other related organizations and bodies. This is serious matter, which should be addressed for the promotion of tourism in Assam.

**i. Fiscal incentives:** The Government may offer fiscal and other incentives to the private entrepreneurs to take up a host of tourist related services like setting up hotels and restaurants, to purchase vehicles etc. by making provisions for soft loan and reducing tax rates. It may encourage the local youths to set up tents with modern facilities and to make available other related equipment for water sports in areas selected for eco-tourism. In other words, transport, accommodation, and other logistics of tourism should be left to the private sectors making the way for a healthy of privatization of the tertiary sector associated with tourism.

**j. Tourism package for the North East:** Tourism in Assam cannot be viewed in isolation. Assam is the gateway to North-East, which, as stated already, itself is a reservoir of natural beauty with great variety. Many tourists visiting Assam would like to visit Shillong, Cherapunji in Meghalaya and a number of places in Arunachal Pradesh like Tawang, Bomdila, Tezu and Meo. There may be an integrated approach to promote tourism in the region with an attractive package of nature, eco, tea, adventure tourism. The Union Tourism Ministry has given 'special attention' to

develop an integrated approach to eco and adventure tourism. On the similar line and with the active support of the Ministry, the Department of Tourism in collaboration with the ATDC can chalk out a plan of action to develop eco-tourism along with adventure and tea tourism in the state. To that end also there is the need to have a regional approach involving all the states of the region. The North-Eastern Council should come up to play an integrated role in this regard. It will be easy to have coordination with Meghalaya, but it will be a difficult task to have coordination with Arunachal Pradesh where the inner line system is in operation.

In this connection it may be mentioned that the Annual Report of the Ministry of Tourism stipulated 25 travel circuits in the National Action Plan for Tourism, one of which is Guwahati-Kaziranga-Shillong-Tawang (p.3). The Ministry is preparing a master plan for the development of Bhalukpong-Tawang travel circuit. Such steps need an effective coordination among the states of the region.

**k. Role the media:** The media has been playing a significant role in recent years in promoting tourism. Most of the local newspapers are publishing articles and write ups giving coverage to the prospect of tourism in Assam, the places of tourist attraction with coloured photographs. But only a few national dailies have so far given coverage to tourism in Assam. The Directorate of Tourism and the ATDC should take steps even by purchasing space in the national dailies focusing on the attractive places of Assam at least once in a year just before the onset of the peak period of tourism in the state.

**l. Spring festival:** The Department of Tourism and ATDC may organize spring festival on the line of the desert festival in Rajasthan in the historic town of Sibsagar on the courtyard of the Rangghar. This is in addition to what is at present being done in Sankardev Kalakhtra, Guwahati. The festival should be made enchanting with the presentation of songs and dances of the region, enjoyable with various dishes, and colourful with the display of various folk dresses and handicrafts. Conducted tours can be arranged from Sibsagar during that time to Dibru-Saikhowa and Digboi, both are important places of tourist attraction. The project to commission sound and light programme in front of historically important buildings in Sibsagar narrating the history of the Ahom rule covering so many events and stories of love and sacrifice can be very attractive to both domestic and foreign tourists.

**m. Role of the government:** The development of the human, social and economic condition of a state improves greatly where there is effective and pro-people governance. The presence of the government must be felt in the positive sense and within the framework of a welfare state. There may be policies of high order, there may be strategies of unassailable quality, but if there is no good governance, goals set cannot be achieved. In respect of Assam a couple of pertinent points be highlighted:

- The problem of insurgency and violent political movements, which stands as the stumbling block to the development of Assam, has to be resolved at the earliest. The security scenario has to be improved to make Assam absolutely safe for all tourists. Similarly, the national park of Manas should be once again made safe for them.
- The Government of Assam has to market tourism through the ATDC.
- The tourism policy of 1987 has to be made known to the people along with the steps taken towards its implementation. People's involvement in tourism should be sought by offering incentives to them to venture wayside amenities. This may produce good results.
- Effective methodology has to be evolved and implemented to forge coordination of various departments and organizations directly and indirectly associated with tourism.
- With the upgradation of the airport in Guwahati to international standard the prospect of foreign tourists visiting the region has become brighter than before. The task of ensuring good sanitary condition around the tourist spots and the improvement of the condition of the railway and bus stations nearby the tourist spots should be urgently taken up.
- The central assistance to upgrade facilities and infra-structural development should be tapped and properly utilized. The Central allocation of assistance to the state in this regard during financial year of 1998-99 was Rs 13.76 crore and out this Rs 4.6 crore was released. It is imperative to have an effective monitoring system, so that the projects sponsored by the government are implemented on time and in right earnest. This can be accomplished only when there is transparency and vigilance.
- While promoting tourism utmost care should be taken to restrain it from degenerating into "mass tourism" which carries a host of evils capable of destabilizing the society. In this regard the 'correct approach' adopted by the Government of Sikkim may be followed.