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Prospects and Challenges of Tea Tourism in Assam with Governments Initiatives to Promote the Sector

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Abstract

Tea tourism in Assam represents an emerging sector in India's tourism industry, offering unique cultural and economic value. This paper examines the prospects and challenges of tea tourism in Assam, a region known for its tea estates that produce some of the finest teas in the world. Key opportunities in tea tourism include promoting local culture, creating job opportunities, and enhancing economic growth. However, several challenges such as infrastructure gaps, environmental impacts, and socio-cultural sensitivities hinder its growth. Additionally, this paper explores the government's role in promoting tea tourism through policy frameworks, incentives, and collaborations with stakeholders to create sustainable tourism solutions.

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Introduction

Assam, located in north eastern India, is globally renowned for its tea production. With tea estates dating back to the colonial period, Assam is the World's largest tea producing region, it produces nearly 52% of India's total tea production. The state's tea tourism, dating back to the 19th century, as played a vital role in shaping the economy and culture of Assam. The state's scenic tea gardens, heritage bungalows, and rich cultural history provide a distinctive tourism experience. Tea tourism, a niche segment of tourism, offers an immersive experience, allowing visitors to explore tea plantation, learn about tea production and engage with local communities. Tea tourism, a subset of agri. tourism, focuses on tea plantations and provides visitors with an immersive experience in the tea-making process, lifestyle, and culture associated with tea estates. Tea tourism in Assam has tremendous potential for contributing to regional development and preserving cultural heritage while also creating employment opportunities.

India began researching tea in 1891 with the establishment of the Joint Committee of the India Tea Association (ITA). The late Harler, a former ITA scientific officer, wrote the well-known tea book "The Culture and Marketing of Tea." It was

initially published in 1933 and was a significant introduction to the Eastern Asian tea industry. Tea culture, as defined by Harler, is the science and practice of growing tea.

For many years, Assam tea has delighted customers all over the world with its unique flavour and taste, which can satisfy both domestic and international travellers.

Assam tea plantation bungalows, with their rows of shaded trees and "Green Carpet" of verd and foliage, as well as the state indigenous tribe and people's unique rhythmic music and dance, attract both domestic and foreign tourists and bring revenue for the area.

Tea tourism is a unique kind of leisure travel that allows visitors to discover and savour everything associated with tea. While taking in the natural beauty of the tea gardens, visitors can go hiking or take a nature walk. Golfing and rafting are further options. Tourists can stay and eat in natural settings in luxurious tea bungalows. Engaging with tea workers, harvesting leaves, and attending cultural events are all products of ethnic tea tourism in this area. Behind cola and coffee as the most popular drinks in the world (Cheng *et al.*, 2012). The term "tea tourism" describes themed travel motivated by curiosity about the production and cultivation of tea (Jolliffe, 2007).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, interest in tea tourism has grown; in fact, it is even referred to as a recently emerging trend in travel (Liu, 2019). In terms of global tourism, tea tourism is a relatively new sector. The beautiful Assamese green tea fields are attracting an increasing number of tourists, contributing to the growth of tea tourism in India.

Objectives

This study's primary goal is to comprehend how tea tourism might draw visitors to Assam. Among the additional goals are:

1. To comprehend the idea behind tea tourism
2. To assess Assamese tea tourism's potential and issues
3. To evaluate the government initiative for promoting Tea tourism.

Research Methodology

This study combined a variety of data collection techniques including both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. A questionnaire was used to gather primary data via a variety of social media channels. A review of the literature and pertinent online resources are used to get the secondary data. The investigation was carried out using scholarly books, journal articles, and websites.

Literature Review

Foreign visitors come to view the beaches, the visual majesty of the region's lush flora and web of rivers, tribal culture, religious rites, historical sites, woodlands, animals, and hill resorts. (Syed & Hasan, 2016). Tea tourism is one of the various forms of tourism that are available in places that grow tea all over the world (Koththagoda & Thushara, 2016). "Travel that is inspired by an interest in the history, customs, and use of tea" is how Jolliffe (2007) defines tea tourism.

According to Zhang (2004), the rise of tea tourism is a way to highlight tea-growing areas with stunning landscapes or unique historical contexts. Many activities, like as sight-seeing, education, shopping, and other forms of tourism and entertainment, are used to promote a destination's tea culture.

Ji (2006) claims that tea museums, tea gardens, tea-related events, tea shops, tea festivals, and tea-related goods are all part of China's tea tourism industry. According to research conducted in Xining, China, tea tourists are primarily tea enthusiasts between the ages of 31 and 40, and people's opinions about tea tourism were strongly impacted by their tea-drinking habits (Cheng *et al.*, 2010). In Sri Lanka, tea tourists had hoped for peace, comfort, and a tea estate (Jolliffe & Aslam, 2009).

Tea tourism is less popular than wine, beer, and culinary tourism. Special interest tourism (SIT) and Fernando *et al.* (2017) claim that SIT is a new niche market that has developed by customising a specific tourism product to meet the needs of a niche market (Jolliffe, 2007). SIT involves going to places to satisfy one's individual needs and special interests in a particular region or location (Liu, 2019). Travel and tourism associated to tea are booming in a number of countries, such as Sri Lanka and Thailand (JOLIFFE, 2003). As the world's leading producer of tea, India has seen a 160 percent increase in planted tea area and a 304 percent increase in production during the last 50 years (Shah & Pate, 2016).

Prospects of Tea Tourism

- **Employment Opportunities:** Tea tourism in Assam can create employment opportunities for the local population. By attracting visitors, it promotes the demand for guides,

hospitality staff, and artisans involved in tea-related activities.

- **Cultural Preservation and Promotion:** Tea tourism allows Assam to showcase its unique heritage, traditional tea-making processes, and indigenous crafts. Tea estate tours often include experiences such as tea-tasting sessions, visits to heritage bungalows, and cultural performances, which serve to educate tourists on Assam's rich cultural history.
- **Economic Growth:** Tea tourism could generate significant revenue by attracting domestic and international tourists. According to estimates, integrating tea tourism could also contribute to Assam's GDP, foster entrepreneurship, and provide local farmers with additional income.
- **Promotion of Eco-Tourism:** Tea tourism has the potential to promote eco-friendly practices. Visitors are drawn to scenic landscapes and biodiversity in Assam's tea gardens, which can align with environmentally conscious tourism. With proper planning, Assam's tea tourism can promote sustainable tourism by encouraging responsible travel and conservation efforts.

Challenges in Developing Tea Tourism

- **Infrastructure Development:** While Assam's tea gardens hold appeal, accessibility remains a concern. Poor road connectivity and limited public transportation make it difficult for tourists to reach remote estates. Developing infrastructure such as roads, airports, and accommodations near tea estates is essential for promoting tea tourism.
- **Socio-Economic Challenges:** The local communities in Assam are predominantly dependent on tea cultivation. Introducing tourism brings concerns related to socio-economic stability, including potential increases in living costs, competition for resources, and socio-cultural disruptions. Engaging local communities in tourism activities is crucial to ensure their inclusion and benefit from tea tourism.
- **Environmental Impact:** While tea tourism holds eco-tourism potential, unregulated tourism could disrupt Assam's delicate ecosystem. Increased tourist traffic can strain water and waste resources, affecting both tea estates and nearby wildlife. There is a need to implement sustainable practices and guidelines to minimize environmental degradation.
- **Preservation of Cultural Identity:** The commercialization of tea estates for tourism purposes could lead to cultural commodification. It is essential to balance tourism activities with cultural preservation to ensure that local traditions, rituals, and customs associated with tea cultivation are not overshadowed by market-driven interests.

Governments Initiative to Promote Tea Tourism

The Government of Assam, along with the local governments, has taken multiple initiatives to encourage the tea tourism.

- **Infrastructure Development Projects:** The Government of India, through its Ministry of Tourism, has allocated funds for tourism infrastructure development in Assam under the "Swadesh Darshan Scheme." This scheme includes developing roads, improving connectivity, and enhancing amenities in popular tourist circuits, which also benefits tea tourism.

- **Assam Tourism Policy-2017:** Assam's Tourism Policy 2017 emphasizes tea tourism as a priority area. The policy provides tax benefits, capital subsidies, and exemptions from luxury tax to promote tourism infrastructure around tea estates. Under this policy, the government has encouraged private investors to develop accommodations, tour packages, and other tourist services in tea estates.
- **Tea Heritage Circuit:** Assam is working to establish a dedicated "Tea Heritage Circuit" to provide tourists with a guided experience across notable tea estates in Jorhat, Dibrugarh, and other districts. This circuit will feature experiences such as guided tours, tea tastings, and visits to historical tea bungalows, enhancing Assam's visibility as a tea tourism destination.
- **Promoting Local Arts and Handicrafts:** Recognizing the importance of culture in tea tourism, the government has initiated programs to support local artisans. In partnership with tourism stakeholders, the government promotes local crafts and performances at tea estates, encouraging tourists to appreciate Assam's indigenous arts and crafts.
- **Collaboration with Private Sector:** Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) are being encouraged to bridge the investment gap in tourism infrastructure. Collaborations with private players allow for the development of resorts, wellness centres, and recreational activities in and around tea estates, enhancing the visitor experience.
- **Training Programs for Local Communities:** The government has initiated skill development and training programs to empower locals with hospitality, tour guiding, and other tourism-related skills. This effort aims to integrate local communities into tea tourism and ensure sustainable income generation.
- **Accommodation Options:** Build or upgrade a range of accommodation options, from eco-lodges and home stays to more luxurious boutique hotels, ensuring that there is something for every budget. The accommodation should reflect the tea culture, offering unique experiences like sleeping within a tea estate or enjoying tea-inspired decor.
- **Amenities:** Ensure there are adequate facilities such as restrooms, cafés serving tea and local snacks, visitor centers with educational material, and souvenir shops that offer tea-related products.
- **Sustainable Development:** Focus on environmentally-friendly infrastructure, including solar power, waste management systems, and water conservation practices, which will appeal to eco-conscious travelers and align with the values of tea estates that emphasize sustainability.
- **Involve Local Artisans & Producers:** Partner with local tea producers, artisans, and chefs to offer authentic, hands-on experiences. This could include traditional tea-picking demonstrations, local cooking classes using tea, or showcasing locally made tea accessories like teapots and cups.
- **Cultural Immersion:** Encourage tourists to experience the local culture beyond tea cultivation, such as participating in local festivals, staying with local families, and learning about indigenous practices, languages, and cuisines.
- **Sustainable Sourcing:** Ensure that local communities benefit economically by sourcing products locally (e.g., food, handicrafts, and supplies) and ensuring fair wages for tea workers. This can also promote the long-term viability of the tea tourism industry.
- **Promote Local Guides:** Involve local community members as guides to share stories about the history of tea, the region, and its cultural significance. This fosters a sense of pride within the community and enhances the visitor's experience.
- **Comprehensive Training Modules:** Develop training programs that focus on both the technical aspects of tea production (such as the different types of tea, how it's grown, processed, and brewed) and soft skills like communication, hospitality, and safety. Guides should be able to educate tourists in an engaging way while also addressing their questions.
- **Local Culture & History:** Train guides to share stories not only about the tea industry but also the local culture, history, and environmental factors that influence tea growing in the region. Guides should be able to create a connection between the tea estate and the community's heritage.
- **Sustainability Awareness:** Incorporate eco-tourism and sustainability training into the program so that guides can explain how the tea estates are adopting green practices and preserving the natural environment. This could include sustainable farming, eco-friendly packaging, and the importance of biodiversity in tea-growing areas.
- **Certification & Recognition:** Provide certifications for guides who complete the training. This adds credibility and encourages high standards of professionalism. Furthermore, it enhances the attractiveness of the destination by ensuring that tourists receive quality service and accurate, engaging information.

Recommendations

- **Research & Identify Target Audience:** First, it is essential to understand who would be most interested in tea tourism-this could include tea enthusiasts, nature lovers, eco-tourists, and people seeking cultural or wellness tourism. The campaigns can be customized to each of these groups.
- **Create Compelling Content:** Develop content that highlights the picturesque beauty of tea plantations, the rich history of tea-making, and the unique experiences available, such as tea tastings, farm tours, and workshops. This content can be spread through social media, blogs, websites, and YouTube channels.
- **Leverage Influencers & Bloggers:** Partner with travel influencers and tea bloggers to generate buzz and create authentic content about tea tourism. This will allow for organic reach and an audience who trusts their opinions.
- **Use Data-Driven Targeting:** Utilize digital marketing tools to identify where potential visitors are located and what interests them, using social media ads, Google Ads, and SEO strategies. Additionally, creating partnerships with airlines or travel agencies can help attract tourists from specific regions.
- **Transport and Accessibility:** Improve roads leading to tea plantations, create shuttle services from nearby towns or airports, and offer well-signposted trails for tourists. Accessibility is key to attracting a broader demographic of visitors.

Conclusion

Tea tourism in Assam has immense potential to contribute to the state's economy while preserving its rich cultural heritage. By attracting tourists to experience Assam's tea heritage, the industry can generate employment, promote cultural exchange, and enhance the socio-economic landscape of tea-growing regions. However, challenges such as infrastructure inadequacies, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic concerns must be addressed to ensure the sector's long-term viability. The government's role is crucial in creating policies, providing incentives, and encouraging public-private partnerships to foster a sustainable and culturally respectful tea tourism industry. With a balanced approach, Assam can position itself as a leading tea tourism destination globally. By developing targeted marketing campaigns, investing in tourism infrastructure, collaborating with local communities, and establishing training programs for tour guides, tea tourism can grow into a sustainable, culturally rich, and economically beneficial sector. These efforts will not only provide memorable experiences for visitors but also support the long-term success of the industry, creating a positive impact on both the tourism economy and local communities. When it comes to developing tea culture tourism, Assam has certain advantages, but there are also some disadvantages, such as unclear product characteristics and strong seasonality. Therefore, Assam has to capitalise on the opportunities presented by Tuijin Jishu/Journal of Propulsion Technology for the promotion of tea culture tourism while also concentrating on the creation of linked goods, the growth of relevant knowledge, and the marketing of tea culture tourism. Follow the latest trends and adapt your marketing strategies frequently to guarantee the robust and long-term expansion of tea culture tourism.

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