

Rural Tourism and Sustainable Livelihoods

A Case Study of Majuli Island of Assam

Bikash Hazarika

Department of Economics, Dhakuakhana College, Assam, India

Abstract- Rural tourism is a form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially. It is a recent offshoot of tourism sector that has grown up to be a potential business in its own space. It is a significant strategy for rural development by providing an alternate source of livelihood and large scale employment in the rural areas.

The development of a strong platform around the concept of Rural Tourism is definitely useful for a state like Assam, where 86% (Census of India 2011) of the population resides in rural areas. Moreover, Assam is a conglomeration of various ethnic tribes and groups each having a distinct language, culture, festivals, songs and dances. The rural Assam has a great potentiality to attract tourists who are in search of authentic natural and cultural resources. Majuli is the largest river island in the world and is located on the Brahmaputra River. It has a great potentiality for different growing segments of tourism like Eco-tourism, Cultural Tourism, Agri-tourism and Religious Tourism. Although government has been launching various rural development and wage employment schemes for providing rural livelihood security, but due to some defect it fails to show hopeful result. So in this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the potentialities of rural tourism as a tool of sustainable livelihood to the rural poor.

Index Terms- Rural tourism, sustainable livelihood, rural development, Majuli.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is a significant strategy for rural development by providing an alternative source of livelihood and large scale employment in the rural areas. Most of the countries of the world have recognized rural tourism as an important instrument for sustainable livelihood of the rural people.

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future [Department for International Development, 1999].

In Assam 86 percent (population census 2011) of the population live in rural areas and more than 70 percent are dependent primarily on agriculture. But rural Assam has much to offer beyond agriculture. It has a great potentiality for different segments of tourism like eco-tourism, adventure tourism, health tourism, farm tourism, nature base tourism, cultural tourism,

religious tourism etc. Majuli is the largest river island in the world and is located on the Brahmaputra River. It has great potentiality to rural tourism development and can provide livelihood security to the rural poor's.

II. OBJECTIVES

The present study has its general objective to explore the potentiality of rural tourism as a provider of livelihood security to the people of Majuli. The specific objectives of the study are-

- I. To ascertain the trend and composition of tourist inflow into Majuli over the last five years.
- II. To highlight the various challenges faced by the tourist and providers of rural tourism services in the study area.
- III. To suggest ways for improvement of the impact of rural tourism as a perspective tool of rural development in Majuli.

III. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

The information regarding this study has been collected from both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data has been collected through field survey i.e. by taking personal interview of the people involved in this business and the tourist. The secondary sources of the data are published and unpublished sources like books, journals, reports, publications, unpublished doctoral thesis, tour and travel agencies of Majuli sub-division and concerned web sites etc. Secondary data from the Tour and Travel Agencies of Majuli has been used to get an overview of the trend and composition of tourist inflow into island.

IV. AREA OF THE STUDY

Majuli is one of the sub-division of Jorhat district of Assam. It had a total area of 1250 square kilometres, but having lost significantly to erosion, it now has an area of only 650 square kilometres (Devi, 2012). The accelerated rate of shrinkage in the size of island has severe impact on the socio-economic, demographic and cultural dimensions of the population. As per population census 2011, the total population of Majuli was about 167641 with a population density of 364 persons per sq.km. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood of the people of Majuli Island. Out of the total population, a number of 49973 comprising 29.81 percent of the total population constitute the total workforce of which 80.85 percent belongs to the farmers and 2.05 percent agricultural labour and another 17.1 percent

populations were involved with tourism and other activities for their livelihood. But the agricultural productivity of the island is very poor due to heavy food visited to the island year after year. Agriculture had failed to provide livelihood security for the people of Riverine Island. Government initiated wage employment schemes also could not shown satisfactory result. Hence it has felt the necessity of alternative livelihood strategies for the people of the island.

V. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

5.1 Present Scenario of Tourism in Majuli:

Majuli has a great potentiality for different growing segments of tourism like Eco-tourism, Cultural Tourism, Agri-tourism and Religious Tourism etc. Every year, a large number of foreign and domestic tourists have come to the island. It has provided employment to the local residents in a diversified way in terms of rendering various services to the tourists. So tourism business may be an alternative livelihood for the rural poor's and will provide stable income. Majuli, the melting spot of tribes and communities like Ahoms, Kacharies, Brahmins, Kalitas, Konch Rajbongshis, Bonias, Koibatras, Nepalis, Kumars, Bengalis and Rajasthanis etc has been the cultural capital and the cradle of Assamese civilization for the past five hundred years.

Table 1: Trend and Composition of Tourist Inflow into Majuli over the last five years.

Year	No of tourist inflow		
	Domestic	Foreigner	Total
2010-11	37897	6267	44164
2011-12	39947	6849	46796
2012-13	41963	7376	49339
2013-14	43732	7973	51705
2014-15	46768	8031	54799

Source: Tour and Travel Agencies, Majuli

The above table shows an increasing trend of both domestic and foreign tourist inflow into the Majuli Island over the last five years.

The satras set up there, preserve antiques like weapons, utensils, jewellery and other items of cultural significance. Pottery is done in Majuli from beaten clay and burnt in driftwood fired kilns in the same mode as carried out by the people of the ancient Harrappan Civilisation. Sociologists have stressed on the preservation of these unique people, whose culture and dance forms are untouched by modernism. The handloom work of these tribes is also internationally famous. The satras have also honed certain art and craft traditions, which can now be found only here. In Natun Samuguri satra for example, one can still find the craft of mask-making; and in the Kamalabari satra, the finest boats are made. A wetland, Majuli is a hotspot for flora and fauna, harbouring many rare and endangered avifauna species including migratory birds that arrive in the winter season. Among the birds seen here are: the Greater Adjutant Stork, Pelican, Siberian Crane and the Whistling Teal. After dark, wild geese and ducks fly in flocks to distant destinations. The island is

almost pollution free owing to the lack of polluting industries and factories and also the chronic rainfall.

5.2 Tourism and Livelihood Opportunities in Majuli:

Rural tourism has made important contributions to rural incomes both at the level of the individual farmer and more widely in the local community. While not necessarily substituting for agricultural income, it has delivered supplementary income to the rural farmers of the region through facilitating inter-sectoral linkages. So it can be seen as a stable source of livelihood. It raises rural income level. With the rise of income their education, health etc will rise. The price of the agricultural land will rise. Demand for other goods and services will increase and there will be improvement in the public services. Through the increased flow of tourists, local small businessmen will be benefited. The rural people will learn to develop healthy environment with proper sanitation, roads, electricity, telecommunication, etc. They will learn to preserve the natural habitats, bio-diversity historical monuments. Market for agro products and handicrafts will develop in area and the farmers and artisans will develop a direct contact with the customers. Along with this, increasing level of awareness, growing interest in heritage and culture and improved accessibility and environmental consciousness is also increasing the importance of rural tourism.

Besides the farm activities various non-farm activities like handloom, textiles, sericulture, products using cane, bamboo, bell metal and brassware has contributed towards the development of tourism in the island through which both foreign and domestic tourist knows about the cultural entity and background of Majuli. Again by selling these items directly to the tourist, producers can earn a large amount of money. There is a large potential market for farm-based rural tourism especially for foreign tourists in Majuli.

5.3 Current Challenges of the Tourism promotion in Majuli:

Despite immense tourism potential that the region shows, it has not been able to cash in on the same failing even in the domestic market. There are, however several reasons for this

Inadequate Infrastructure:- Highly inadequate road links, extremely poor transport connectivity, lack of air and rail services, inadequate financial infrastructure, weak telecommunication infrastructure, etc has restricted the growth of tourism in Majuli. Most of the places of tourist attraction are not by the road side, and approach roads are in bad condition. This is a strong discouraging factor, which works against a good inflow of the tourist. Apart from the infrastructural bottleneck, inferior food quality, lack of well arranged package tour, poor service at the hotels and tourist guest houses, lack of facilities like good hotels and tourist lodges, affordable and reliable communication network, etc have been hampering the expected development and promotion of tourism in the region.

Absence of Tourist Guides:- Majuli 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 region.

Lack of Coordinated Efforts:- 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.

Underdeveloped Human Resource:- The tour operators, hoteliers, transporters, tourist guides etc are not trained enough to provide detailed information to the tourists regarding the region which obviously is a barrier in the path of development of tourism industry in Majuli.

Thus despite abundance of natural beauty, the flow of incoming tourist has been marginal for the reasons of the lack of infrastructural and other related facilities in various tourist spots in the region.

5.4 SOME SUGGESTIVE MEASURES

Tourism, thus, can be considered as a stable source of livelihood in the region. Some recommendations can be made in the following ways-

- Proper planning of master plans needs to be prepared with specific objectives be integrated with Majuli's overall economic and social development objective.
- Government intervention is necessary to enhance the contribution of tourism for providing livelihood security and poverty reduction.
- Maintains proper co-ordination and monitoring amongst various agencies and bodies of tourism.
- Private sector partnerships and public-private partnerships should be incorporated.
- Proper development of infrastructure, tourist facilities, enhancement of communication networks etc.
- Enhancement of the role of media in promoting tourism.
- State government should provide proper infrastructure for rural tourism in Majuli.

VI. CONCLUSION

Tourism is an industry, which brings the world together, leads to enrichment of knowledge, exchange of culture and fosters international understanding. It is one of the largest industries in the world in terms of revenue and employment generation. Peoples all over the world are growing more interest to rural tourism or nature base tourism. The new approach of

tourism can be a path to employment generation and economic development. Majuli is enriched with numerous attractive and diverse tourist resources, which is spread over different areas of the island. It is also regarded as the gold mine of tourism. If this resources would be utilized in proper way for attracting tourist, it will generate a considerable extent of livelihood opportunity and stable income to the rural poor's of the island.

REFERENCES

- [1] Akhtar, N., 2014, Tourism as an Engine of Rural Development in India- A Case Study of Sualkuchi Silk Village, Assam, Indian Streams of Research Journal, Vol. 4.
- [2] Arnall, A., David S. G. Thomas, Chasca Twyman and Diana Liverman, 2013, Flooding, resettlement and change in livelihoods: evidence from rural Mozambique, Disasters, 37(3): 468-488.
- [3] Ashley, C., 2000, The Impact of Tourism on Rural Livelihood: Namibia's Experience, Working Paper 128, Overseas Development Institute, Portland House, Stag Place, London.
- [4] Ashley, C., 2002, Methodology for pro-poor tourism case studies, Working Paper Series, Overseas Development Institute, Portland House, Stag Place, London.
- [5] Ashley, Caroline, 1995, Tourism, communities and the potential impacts on local incomes and conservation, Ministry of Environment and Tourism, Namibia, Research discussion paper number 10.
- [6] Bradbeer, J., 1996, Rural Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development, Area, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 241.
- [7] Das, D., 2012, Tourism Industry in North- East Indian States: Prospects and Problems, Global Research Methodology Journal, Vol. II, 7th issue.
- [8] Devi, M. K., 2012, Ecotourism in Assam: A Promising Opportunity for Development, SAJTH, Vol. 5, No. 1.
- [9] Kalita, S., 2010, A Journey of Empowering a Community for Self Reliance: Endogenous Tourism Project in Sualkuchi, Assam, India, Field Actions Science Reports, Vol.4.
- [10] Singh, S., 1997, Developing human resources for the tourism Industry with reference to India, Tourism Management, Vol. 18, No. 5, pp. 299-306.
- [11] Tchetchik, A., Aliza Fleischer and Israel Finkelshtain, 2008, Differentiation and Synergies in Rural Tourism : Estimation and Simulation of the Israeli Market, American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Vol. 90, No. 2, pp. 553-570

AUTHORS

First Author – Bikash Hazarika, Assistant Professor of Economics, Dhakuakhana College, Under Dibrugarh University, Assam (India), Email: hazarika.bikash235@gmail.com.