



Conceptualising Community-based Tourism and Its Prospects in Assam

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Abstract: The concept of community participation is a popular term and has been in use for over half a century. It is well known for providing assistance for community development and in a way helping the tourism industry to become an exploitative. The tourism industry itself has its global presence, and thereby, it requires constant support of the community who help in achieving economic fortune through their participation. However, communities differ a lot as tourism developments are very different in their historical, cultural and geographical settings. Communities also differ in their ability to accommodate changes, and like the economic forces that make it utmost necessary to create possibilities for sustainability a way of life. This paper is an attempt to study the development of the concept of community-based tourism over the years and its growing importance. This paper shall also examine the possibilities of the successful implementation of community-based tourism in Assam.

Index Terms: Community-based tourism, CBT Approaches, Community Tourism Units, Responsible Tourism

I. INTRODUCTION

The rising issue concerning visitor management, as mentioned by (Wheeller, 1992), has developed a continuous urge to look for a suitable or alternative form of tourism. An alternative form of tourism was sought, mostly to promote the quality of life of people, to conserve the environment and at the same time to promote tourism services. Community-based tourism centres on the involvement of the host community in planning and maintaining tourism development to create a more sustainable industry (Blackstock, 2005). The interest in experiencing the local ways of life and culture, along with the interest in improving the socio-economic status of the local communities, has led to the development of the concept of CBT. Community-based tourism is one of the typical types of tourism that works towards sustainable development with three important goals, which are bringing back economic benefits, protecting the natural environment, and preserving indigenous cultural values (Phuong, 2020). It is about social justice, empowerment, equity of benefits, redistributive measures, ownership of the tourism sector and holistic community development (Saayman, 2018).

Suansri (2003) defines CBT as “tourism that takes environmental, social and cultural sustainability into account, which is managed and owned by the community, for the community, with the purpose of enabling visitors to increase their awareness and learn about the community and local ways of life.”

CBT initiatives are owned by one or more defined communities or run as joint venture partnerships with the private sector. It involves equitable community participation as a means of using the natural resources sustainably to improve their standard of living in an economically viable way. CBT, thereby, is promoted to empower the local communities, cultural preservation, economic development, environmental sustainability, mutual understanding and cultural exchange between visitors and community members, and community wellbeing through social development initiatives.

However, the degree of experience is also dependent upon the visitor's level of participation at the community destinations. With the active participation of visitors, the experience can extend into the local community's daily livelihood activities and rituals, learning and cooking local foods, learning local wisdom and assisting with local socio-economic development projects (Boonratana, 2010).

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper is an assessment of the development of the concept of community-based tourism as a rising concept. The paper also studies the possibilities of CBT development and the current status of CBT promotion in Assam.

III. STUDY AREAS AND METHODS

Assam lies in a latitude of 26.244156 and a longitude of 92.537842. Assam is a Northeastern state, which shares its borders with Bhutan and other northern states of the country. The state is located near the Himalayas and has astounding natural views, with plenty of valleys, rivers, creeks and waterfalls. Assam is also rich in tourism and natural resources, with long and unique cultural and historical resources that attract both local and international visitors. It is endowed with plentiful natural and cultural resources, which is an advantageous factor for the growth of the tourism industry of the region. Growth of the tourism industry creates employment and improves the well-being of the communities. As the demand for tourism in the state has seen a rise in the last couple of years, it has become imperative to create an ecosystem, that offers tourists with a better experience. Also the growing consciousness of the environment amongst tourists, Assam has groomed itself to a potential state to develop community-based tourism to promote sustainability. With its unique landscape, a separate and inimitable lifestyle and culture, this form of tourism industry is seen as a catalyst in changing the dynamics of the tourism scenario of Assam for the sustainable implementation of tourism activities.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study is a conceptual offering to the literature of community-based tourism development, while emphasizing on the potential of CBT development of Assam. A qualitative approach was used to analyze secondary data from published academic literature, including journal articles, reports, and books. The literature was sourced primarily from peer-reviewed journals indexed in databases like Scopus and Web of Science, focusing on publications from 1950 to 2024. Key search terms included “community development,” “community-based tourism,” “sustainable tourism,” and “local participation.”



Source: <https://directortourism.assam.gov.in/portlets/guide-map-brochure>

V. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Community development has undergone significant evolution since its inception in the mid-20th century, influencing various development sectors, including tourism. This review systematically traces the evolution of the concept of community-based tourism (CBT) by categorising the literature across decades, highlighting key themes, and identifying research gaps.

The concept of community development started during the 1950s-1960s as an approach to rural development. Under the aegis of the United Nations, the idea of community development gained popularity to educate local people & involve them in decision-making. The rationale behind community development was to educate and remove the stigma of charity and involve rural people in decision-making. Aid agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, and the United Nations started promoting community participation during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This approach was promoted to involve locals in decision-making, programme implementation, sharing the benefits of development, and evaluating the programmes (Sebele, 2010). However, it was observed that rural development was hindered due to top-down approaches to development and thereby requiring the active involvement of locals in development issues (Sebele, 2010). The conceptual origin of the term CBT appeared as a part of the community-based tourism development strategy in the 1970s (Saayman, 2018; Santili, 2009). CBT developed as a result of the sustainable tourism movement and the emergence of small-scale and ecotourism products. The inclusion and involvement of local communities have been seen as a key resource in sustaining tourism products (Hardy, 2002). In this case, the sustainable tourism movement and eco-tourism development paved the way for the development of CBT to form a link between tourism & poverty reduction in Least Developed Countries (Pawson, 2016).

During the mid-1980s to 1990s, it was also observed that the study on CBT had increased, and CBT enterprises became more abundant, definitions and conceptual narratives expanded and became more ‘scientific’. CBT is used as an instrument by NGOs to address regional socio-economic development (Pawson, 2016). From the mid-1990s to early 2000, along with the stress on the academic literature development, CBT enterprises have started to become more visible, especially in the developing world, as communities became aware of the benefits of CBT. It was also used as a tool to address poverty in rural and regional communities (Pawson, 2016).

Blackstock expressed a need to understand the relationship between community participation and power structures to advance more empowering and socially just understandings of CBT (Blackstock, 2005). Critical evaluations started regarding the extent to which the practice of CBT is community-oriented, and analyses have begun to check whether these developments were self-determined choices or impositions. The studies have been conducted to understand the level of participation of the community members, and it was even realised that tourism development through the community was more suitable for economically limited settings (Mayaka et al., 2018).

Recent literature emphasises more on the negative impacts of tourism on the local community in developing and less developed countries. Moreover, it also displayed the need for shifting towards resource management and community development paradigms in support of sustainable tourism (Tasci et al., 2013). Studies about CBT initiatives have been observed to focus on the redistribution of economic benefits to indigenous communities (Garcia Lucchetti & Font, 2013). CBT has started to be framed as an inclusive development approach that focuses on participation, benefit-sharing, environmental ethics, and socio-cultural revitalisation (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). In the present scenario, research has been conducted to integrate CBT within the Sustainable Development Guidelines to create a resilient community in the face of over-tourism and climate change. CBT has also emerged as a youth-led initiative to promote local governance, participative decision-making, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation to ensure that tourism aligns with the values and aspirations of the host community.

The following table shows the development and growth of the concept of community-based tourism over the decades:

Period	Perspective regarding the development of CBT
1950s-60s	Community development was introduced as an approach to rural development.
1960s to 1970s	The conceptual origin of the term CBT appeared as a part of the community-based development strategy in the 1970s. CBT developed as a consequence of the sustainable tourism movement and the emergence of small-scale and ecotourism products. It was an alternative to unsustainable mass tourism.
1970s-80s	Inclusion and involvement of local communities in tourism began as local residents were seen as a key resource in sustaining the tourism product. CBT emerged during the 1970s as a response to the negative impacts of international mass tourism.
1980s-90s	CBT was referred to as an essential form of alternative tourism. CBT presents a way to provide an equitable flow of benefits to all affected by tourism through consensus-based decision-making and local control of development.
1990s-mid 90s	The study of CBT increased, and CBT enterprises became more abundant, definitions and conceptual narratives expanded and became more 'scientific'.
Mid 90s to 2000s	CBT enterprises have started to become more and more visible, especially in the developing world, as communities have become aware of the benefits of CBT. It was also used as a tool to address poverty in rural and regional communities.
2000s to 2005s	Critical evaluations started regarding the extent to which it is community-oriented and whether these developments were self-determined choices or impositions. It was realized that tourism development through the community was more suitable for economically limited settings.
2006-2015	The negative impacts of tourism on the local community in developing and less developed countries were felt. It was felt that there is a need for a shift towards resource management and community development paradigms in support of sustainable tourism. Recent studies show that CBT acts as a way of cultural and environmental conservation. Studies also focus on the residents' perception regarding CBT and initiatives have been observed for cost-benefit analysis as well.
2015 onwards	Recent studies focus on community participation, benefit-sharing, environmental ethics, and socio-cultural revitalisation. There has been integration of CBT with the Sustainable Development Goals, and participatory initiatives have been given more importance to create resilience in the face of over-tourism and climate change.

Source: Self-compilation by the Author

V.A. DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES IN ASSAM

Tourism development at any destination should focus on the benefit of the local community in terms of economic and social gains. The economic objective of the tourism industry involves generating employment opportunities for the local population. Tourism helps increase the incomes of local people to enjoy a better standard of living. This enables the community to live in harmony and peace with their surroundings.

Assam is considered a prominent destination for tourists from East and Southeast Asian Countries. Therefore, the Government of Assam and the various stakeholders have devised different policies and programmes to promote tourism in the state. As a result, the Tourism Policy of Assam was developed, and it emphasizes community involvement in tourism. It suggested participation and the acceptance of the local community as the key to make Tourism a success (Tourism Policy of Assam, 2017). The Assam Tourism Policy, 2017, speaks of making Assam an all-season tourist destination (Tourism Policy of Assam, 2017). To attain so, the Department of Tourism proposed to run awareness programmes on Responsible Tourism among the populace living in the vicinity with the help of Local Management Committees. Also, to increase community participation, the mapping of local handicrafts, artwork, etc., which are fast disappearing, was proposed to be restored and promoted among the new generation of artisans to prevent their extinction in the policy document.

Table 1: Table Showing the Year-wise tourists Inflow in Assam and Revenue Earned from the Tourists, 2009-10 to 2023-24:

Year-wise Tourists Inflow in Assam and Revenue Earned from the Tourists, 2009-10 to 2023-24:			
Year	Indian	Foreigner	Total Revenue earned from Tourist lodges only
2009-2010	3895525	14699	131.63 (in lakh)
2010-2011	4127447	15633	143.60 (in lakh)
2011-2012	4408333	16660	184.49 (in lakh)
2012-2013	4544666	17708	248.19 (in lakh)
2013-2014	4444393	19086	191.32 (in lakh)
2014-2015	4863826	20005	211.77 (in lakh)
2015-2016	5642950	26320	1057.24 (in lakh)
2016-2017	4863826	7209	252.39 (in lakh)
2017-2018	59343391	31739	243.02 (in lakh)
2018-2019	6027002	41209	303.09 (in lakh)
2019-2020	5146307	18594	1003.47 (in lakh)
2020-2021	1351690	346	1174.61 (in lakh)
2021-2022	1702932	1231	1813.09 (in lakh)
2022-2023	9812195	18946	-
2023-2024	7041206	26129	-

Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024

Fig 1: Year-wise Tourists Inflow in Assam, 2009-10 to 2023-24: Indian Tourists



Fig 2: Year-wise Tourists Inflow in Assam, 2009-10 to 2021-22: Foreign Tourists

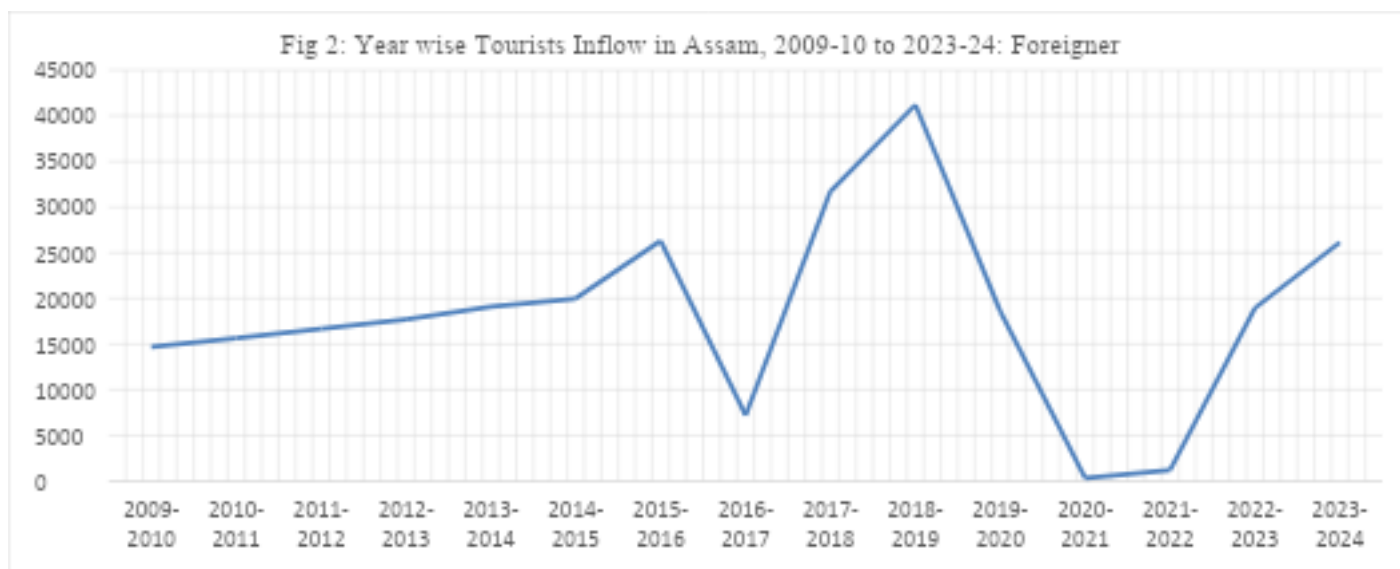
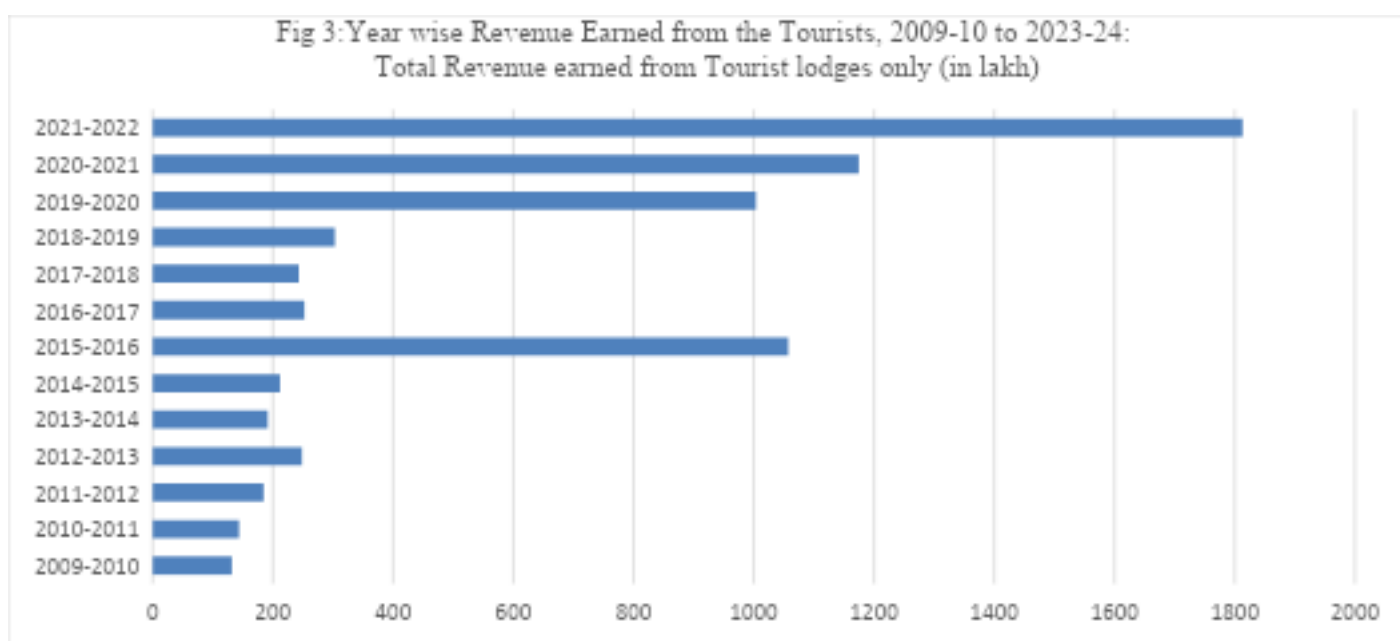


Figure 3: Year-wise Revenue Earned from the Tourists, 2009-10 to 2021-22 (in lakh)



Since 2017, different development efforts have been undertaken to promote community tourism in Assam, keeping in line with the Assam Tourism Policy document. As per the data shown above, the tourist arrivals have also multiplied after the tourism policy was implemented in the state. While Assam has experienced a substantial increase in overall tourist arrivals in the past two years compared to the pandemic and pre-pandemic periods, the number of foreign tourists has declined. In contrast, domestic tourism has seen a notable surge. As of January 2024, the state had recorded approximately 5.852 million tourist visits.

Assam has also undertaken aggressive marketing to promote tourism in the state. The Government of Assam initiated “Awesome Assam” marketing campaigns through social media handles to attract younger as well as environmentally aware tourists. The entire process of marketing and branding has commenced to make Assam a sought-after location amongst national and international visitors.

The Government of Assam, also in order to promote tourism in the state, has introduced “Aamaar Aalohi Community-based Homestay Scheme, 2022-23.” The scheme has been launched by the Department of Tourism, Govt. of Assam, which aims to promote homestay facilities, create self-employment opportunities, and provide authentic hospitality experiences to tourists.

As per the scheme, a community-based tourism unit refers to a group or cluster of at least 10 homestay units that form a Community Tourism Organisation (CTO) near a specific tourist destination. Intending to promote tourism activities in the local community, the scheme invites the community to join in the scheme, wherein the local community can provide accommodation and hospitality services to tourists.

Community-based tourism units aim to empower the local residents, generate economic benefits for the community, preserve cultural heritage, and promote sustainable and responsible tourism practices. They are to offer unique cultural experiences, traditional cuisine, and opportunities for tourists to interact with locals, learn about their customs and traditions, and contribute to the overall welfare of the community. To promote community-based tourism in the state, the government, through this programme, has taken the initiative to register the existing homestays and set up new homestays in the state with subsidies or marginal money assistance. Assam has also undertaken various other projects, such as single window clearance for film tourism, tourism solutions, punya dham schemes, etc., to encourage the culture of travelling and to promote tourism in the state, amongst other activities.

V.B. Community-based tourism initiatives in Assam:

In recent years, Assam has introduced a range of community-driven initiatives, and these initiatives have successfully positioned the state as a notable destination for community-based tourism. The following table showcases a few examples of the recent and successful tourism initiatives of Assam:

Table 2: Table showing the examples of successful tourism initiatives of Assam:

Sl No.	Location	Thrust Areas	Community Involvement
1	Majuli- World's Largest inhabited river island	Focuses on riverine culture and living practices of Mishing communities. Satras offer mask-making workshops and exposure to the cultural and religious practices of Vaishnavites.	The Assamese community and the Mishing tribe
2	Kaziranga National Park	Along with national park exploration, the thrust has also been given on community-run homestays, tribal cuisine experience, nature walks, and textile exploration	Karbi and Mishing tribes of the fringe villages
3	Chandubi	Community-run eco-tourism, boating, cycling, trekking, and ethnic cuisine experience	Rabha tribe and Rabha Student Union of the location
4	Manas National Park	Eco-tourism, jungle safaris, nature walk, traditional bodo cuisine, and cultural shows	Bodo tribe
5	Dima Hasao (Haflong and Jatinga)	Tribal-centric tourism and offers hill treks, bird watching, eco-tourism, stay with tribal families and ethnic cuisine	Dimasa and Zeme nagas
6	Garbhanga Reserve Forest	Focuses on the community-based tourism model with grassroots conservation-tourism alignment. The activities involved are forest treks, bamboo product demonstrations, and bird watching.	Garo tribe and other forest-dwelling groups

Source: Self-compiled by Author

With different initiatives undertaken by stakeholders of society, Assam has been able to create an environment that is suitable for community-based tourism promotion in the state. The rich culture and indigenous practices followed by the people of the region make it a hotspot for elevated tourist experiences. The tribal and rural knowledge system, backed by the proximity to protected areas, has provided the local communities a dual purpose to earn as well as to conserve the environment and local practices. These initiatives have been able to offer significant benefits for the promotion and development of community-based tourism. Community-driven initiatives enable local community members to actively participate in planning, decision-making, and running tourism initiatives, thereby empowering the local community members and boosting their confidence. Assam is also endowed with huge natural resources, and with the community-based tourism practices, the dependence on the forest resources has been substantially reduced, which helps create an alternative source of livelihood. Community-based tourism promotes social cohesion. Collaborative tourism practices not only strengthen bonds amongst community members but also help share responsibilities and benefits, thereby improving the living conditions of the community members. CBT offers personalised experiences rooted in local culture and hospitality, which enhances tourist satisfaction. With the promotion of CBT in Assam, the local community members have been able to provide an immersive tourism experience to the tourists.

VI. CONCLUSION

CBT has developed as a part of the movement of sustainable tourism, with the inclusion and involvement of local communities. Local communities are the key component for sustained tourism development. As a concept of community participation to remove poverty and to involve rural people in economic activities, community-based tourism has come a long way, taking into consideration local community participation, poverty eradication, environmental protection, inclusive economy, etc., to name a few. In Assam, the concept of CBT has been able to grab the attention of the service providers, communities, and tourists, who look for a different experience other than mass tourism. And accordingly, many tourist destinations have been developing in Assam, where the focus has been specifically given to community participation and sharing of economic benefits with the community members. The study has also been able to find that communities in Assam have largely taken part in major decision-making related to tourism development. Even though CBT in Assam is at an experimental stage, it shows immense potential to grow in the tourism sector. Through community-based tourism, an entirely new scope has been created that not only promotes community participation, cultural integration, and environmental protection but also enables better economies with more sustained, socially engaged, and inclusive societies. CBT is required for community development as well as for cultural and environmental protection.

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