

TOURISM IN MEGHALAYA —Policy, Problems and Prospects

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Introduction

All human beings have a desire to move from one place to another for change either for a long duration or for a temporary period. The desire for travel has been fascinating people from the earliest days. They traveled for trade, pilgrimage or discovering the unknown lands. Thus, travel is not a recent phenomenon while tourism is relatively a modern development.

The word "*Tourism*" has its origin in a Latin word '*Tornos*' meaning a tool for describing a circle or turners wheel. From the same Latin word, terms like "*Roundtour*" or a "*Packagetour*" have emerged to give essence to tourism. How the term "*Tour*" evolved no one can explain. But a possible explanation was given that "*Tour*" meaning a trip evolved from tower meaning castle and referred as to leisurely relaxing and sight seeing while going round the parapets of tower. It was only at the 18th century that tour in modern sense it was established as a temporary trip away from home. (Sajjani, 1999)

Tourism has been viewed differently by different people. It is considered as an economic activity which has helped many countries to transform their economies by utilizing its tourism potential to the fullest. And now it has become an important segment of our economy, contributing towards foreign exchange earnings, generation of national income and creation of employment opportunities, particularly in the remote and backward areas. Moreover, recently it has been witnessed as the largest growing services industry in the world with an annual growth of over 5 per cent per annum over the past twenty years. *World Tourism Organization has projected that the annual growth*

would be around 4.5 per cent by 2020 and international tourist arrivals would go up from 613 million to 1.6 billion, as well as spending during the same period would touch a figure of US \$2 trillion from present figure of US \$447 million.' (Sajani, 2002)

Tourism as a service industry has a multipurpose functions (besides generating employment opportunities, contributing to foreign exchange) like protecting art and culture, interaction among people of different regions and even different parts of the world, integration of different regions etc. Thus, it plays an important role in socio-economic development of a country. So if this industry is developed and exploited in a proper manner it will help to solve the unemployment problem to a great extent in Meghalaya.

Meghalaya, *the abode of clouds*, is one of the seven sisters which is located in the north eastern part of India. It was created on 21st january 1972, shillong as its capital which is well known as the pretty hill station. The Khasi, the Jaintia and the Garo inhabit this state. It is a land- locked territory of lovely hills and abounding with enchanting beauty. The state covers an area of 22,429 square kms approximately and has now 7 districts (the East Khasi Hills, the West Khasi Hills, the West Garo Hills, the East Garo Hills the South Garo Hills, the Jaintia Hills and the Ri-Bhoi). It is one of the smallest state with a strip of land along the northern boundary of Bangladesh. And on the other side is surrounded by Assam which can be accessed by road. Meghalaya can be characterized with small patches of beautiful valley, fresh streams and rivers and deep gorges.

It is full of beautiful mountains interspersed with rich meadows and pine forests. It is a home to some rare species of flora and fauna, about three hundred varieties of orchids are found here and it is also rich in wildlife. It has got two national parks, Nokreh and Balpakram. Among these are the traditional sacred forests which represent some of the earliest representatives of preserving the ancient eco-system. The Mawphlang Sacred forest, which is just 25 kms from Shillong is found in its pristine wonder. Meghalaya, bestowed with natural beauty is said to be one of the premier tourist states of the country. It is blessed with pleasant climate, which is naturally attractive for short sojourn for tourist from the plain areas. The main attractions of the state are the golf course, which is one of the best golf courses in the country and the rainiest town of Cherrapunjee (sohra) and Mawsynram, the wettest spots on earth.

Meghalaya has a vast potential for developing tourism as a priority

area which would help the state to earn revenue and strengthen its economy. It becomes more important because this tiny state has very few industries. It is visible that the government has started realizing the importance of tourism and is taking initiatives towards its development by providing subsidies, incentives and assistance to the tourism industry.

Tourism plays an important role in economic, cultural, social as well as political development of a state. Meghalaya has found a place in the tourist map of the country as well as of the world because of Cherrapunjee but there are still many more important places which can boost the economy of the state if they are developed as tourist destinations and marketed accordingly. Tourism has created more employment opportunities as well as it has helped the youth in involving themselves in various ancillary activities whereby helping themselves to be self-employed. It has also helped the state in popularizing local culture and traditions thereby promoting national integration and mutual understanding.

It was during the fourth five year plan (1969-74) when separate allocation was made for tourism in the state and since then the state allocation has been relatively higher (Table 86.1) as compared to the national allocation for tourism which is an evidence of state's emphasis on tourism sector.

Table 86.1: Plan Outlay for Tourism

Five Year Plan	Meghalaya State			Government of India		
	Total outlay	Tourism	%	Total outlay	Tourism	%
	Rs in lacs			Rs in crores		
4th Five Year Plan 1969-1974	3800	25	0.66	15902.2	36	0.226
5th Five Year Plan 1974-1979	8953	36	0.4	39287.49	40.74	0.104
6th Five Year Plan 1980-1985	23500	200	0.85	97500	187.46	0.192
7th Five Year Plan 1985-1990	44000	310	0.7	180000	326.16	0.181
8th Five Year Plan 1992-1997	102900	1860	1.81	434100	272	0.063
9th Five Year Plan 1997-2000	250062	1500	0.6	859200	485.75	0.057
10th Five Year Plan 2002-2007	300900	1650	0.55	893183	2900	0.325

State's Initiatives and Tourism Policy in Meghalaya

Tourism policy is needed in order to direct the development and promotion of tourism and to maximize its benefits. As mentioned earlier it was during 4th five year plan when the state government made some allocation separately for tourism hence during this period the department of tourism, government of Meghalaya, put its efforts in development of tourism by concentrating on building up necessary infrastructure. However only few schemes for providing

accommodation facilities were completed and the schemes were carried forward to fifth plan period 1974-79. In this period the tourism department organized tourists' festival which proved to be successful and there was also increase in the inflow of tourist both domestic and foreign in Meghalaya. Seeing the inflow of tourists the government proposed schemes with a view of providing adequate accommodation facilities for the tourists and making the tourist spots more attractive. With a view of promoting tourism in the state, Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation was constituted during the year 1977. In the sixth plan (1980-85) too investments were made on tourist accommodation schemes i.e., renovation and construction and tourist complex schemes i.e., acquisition of land and building and construction of tourist complex. In the seventh plan (1985-90) tourism was given importance in accordance with the national plan approach. The seventh plan schemes were spill over schemes from the sixth plan which included the construction of tourist's complex, tourist transport services, tourist's publicity and festivals and others. During this period the government of India had approved a scheme whereby releasing Rs 10 lacs for the development of water sports near Shillong in order to diversify the traditional sectors to areas such as wildlife and sports tourism. Moreover an amount of Rs 5 lacs was proposed with a view to strengthen the State Tourism Development Corporation which has helped the tourism sector by promoting private sector investment in the state. And in this plan a new scheme was introduced where 50 per cent subsidy was provided to private sector entrepreneur for preparing a feasibility and projects report. During the eighth plan (1992-97) the privatization of the MTDC was proposed with a view of encouraging investors from outside the state. In the ninth plan 1997-2000, the Government adopted a policy resolution declaring tourism as an industry and emphasis was made for people participation in tourism promotional activities. Efforts were made by the government to create a congenial environment for the development of tourism in the state whereby sustaining employment opportunities to the people in general and the youth in particular. In this period, a reduction in the hotel luxury tax came into effect and through this initiative Meghalaya became the first state in the north east India to have done so. Moreover during this plan there was an increase in the inflow of foreign tourist arrival with the withdrawal of Restricted Area Permit. Keeping in view the development and importance of tourism for the state, the government of Meghalaya felt the need of formulating a tourism policy. So in 2001, the government of Meghalaya announced its first tourism policy keeping in mind the potential of the state and

the priorities setup by the central government in the area of tourism.

The main objectives of the policy are:

- Creating self-sustainable jobs and offering the youth to take up activities like sports, adventure, etc.
- Encouraging domestic (inter-state) tourism for better understanding of geographical and cultural diversity of the state and to bring about national integration and cohesion.
- Generate sustainable revenue for the state.
- To make the state the number one Indian destination and to project a friendly image to the world.
- Promote local interests and create a business climate to attract private investment.
- To preserve and enrich our cultural heritage and encourage traditional artisans and the handicraft sectors.
- To bring socio-economic benefits to the community and the state (employment opportunities, income generation, etc.) and to promote and protect the interest of the people of Meghalaya by making available incentives for setting up of hotels, etc.

The state government has shown serious concern for developing tourism into an industry as it is clearly mentioned the tourism policy (2001) document - *Tourism development is as significant to Meghalaya as has been in the other more progressive states of India where it has grown into a promising industry.* (Tourism Policy 2001).

While in the tenth plan 2002-2007, priority was proposed to be given on the intensification of implementation of the continuing/on going schemes like – development of tourist spots, provision of transport and accommodation facilities to the tourist, water sports, wildlife and adventure tourism etc. the emphasis was shifted to give more importance to the development of Cherrapunjee as number one tourist destination of the state. During 2003 the Government of Meghalaya, Department of Tourism, established a hotel institute in Shillong where education and training is imparted to the potential workforce in the hotel industry. For the benefit of tourists, two new Tourist Information Centres were established at Jowai and Tura, and an extension tourist office was established at Great Eastern hotel, Kolkata. A tourist lodge at Bagmara was set up for the convenience of the tourists. In order to encourage the youth, a state level tourist

guide training course was conducted where about 10 guides were registered. Several tourism awareness programmes were organized to involve people in rural areas. Financial assistance was provided to encourage promotional activities i.e., cultural programmes and festivals of the state. Various programmes were organized in collaboration with other related government department and NGOs to boost tourism in the state.

Problems for Developing Tourism

As already mentioned in the introduction part that although, Meghalaya has an advantage over the other states in the north east india in terms of its unique culture and relatively better infrastructure, it is still lacking behind from the many of the other states. Despite all its potentialities, the industry could not develop to the desired extent due to many factors which may be termed as the 'problems' or obstruction towards the development of the tourism industry. Although there is air connectivity to Shillong, but due to poor weather conditions, effectively road transport is the only means of communication. The nearest railhead is at Guwahati which covers a distance of about 103 km and nearest airport is also in Guwahati at a distance of about 128 km. There is also a helicopter services which operates between Guwahati, Shillong and Tura.

Some of the limiting factors are lack of amenities not only at the tourist centres but also along the routes, which lead to these places. The first and foremost problem faced by the tourism industry is its infrastructure and other facilities i.e., accommodation, transport and communication link etc. Absence of railway and proper transportation facilities in the state for different classes of tourists acts as a hindrance for promoting tourism in the state. Poor connectivity and the bad condition of the road create an obstruction in linking the tourists to the tourist's destinations.

In Meghalaya there are about 50 hotels (including the newly established during the year 2003-2004) both government and private. Most of the hotels are situated in Shillong. Out of the 50 hotels; only 5 hotels are under the government which are run by the MTDC (Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation) and the rest are run by the private entrepreneurs. Out of the total 5 hotels run by MTDC, 2 are situated in Shillong 1 in Umiam, 1 in Sohra and 1 in Tura. The distribution of private hotels in Meghalaya is; out of the 45 hotels, 39 are in Khasi hills, 4 are in Tura (Garo hills) and 2 are in Jowai (Jaintia hills). Seeing the number of hotels in the state it seems there is an inadequate accommodation facility for tourists at various tourist spots

which create a problem for the growth of the industry. The focus is in and around Shillong and other important tourist spots situated in West Khasi hills, Sohra, Garo Hills have not been developed and marketed which needs serious consideration from the government side. As most of the hotels are situated in Shillong, tourists find it difficult to visit and stay at other important places.

The problems faced by tourists coming to this state include improper behavior of the employees in the hotels. The workers working in hotels are not well trained because there is only one hotel institute which can take only few trainees at a time. There is also a lack of sanitation facilities at various tourist spots and the sanitation condition, which is there in various public places or tourists spots, is in a deplorable state. In addition, there is a shortage of drinking water facilities and no healthcare centre is available nearby. Since tourism is mainly about people so the development of tourism mainly depend on people. Tourist comes to visit the state not only to explore beauty or culture of the state but also to interact with the people. Since people of the state don't know about the role they play in the economic development of the state through tourism, they have a bad attitude towards the tourists who come to visit the state. Another hindrance towards the development of tourism is the law and order of the neighbouring states. The state suffers from the problem of insurgency which causes occasional disruptions in the public life.

Prospects for Development of Tourism in Meghalaya

As a service industry, development of tourism industry will not only help in solving the unemployment problem but will also accelerate the speed of economic development of the state. Since "look east policy" has been proposed to be developed, the state can capitalize on this and develop better infrastructure for tourism. It would help the state to increase the number of domestic as well as foreign tourists especially from the neighbouring countries like Mynamar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal etc. The state has 18 hole golf course which can be developed as one of the best golf course in Asia which would help the state to encourage sports tourism. It also has the potential for parks, sanctuaries, trekking, water sports etc. at Umiam Lake and various activities where it can attract a good number of tourists who would like to explore and enjoy the splendid sights that nature has bestow to the state. The initiatives have to be taken to market the state in a positive way to the outsiders so that the impression created for the north east India in general can be changed. As mentioned in the 10th Plan document that tourism should be

positioned as a major engine of economic growth, the state government needs to emphasize the importance of tourism in its policy documents, allocation of funds as well as its proper utilization. Tourism as a priority area can boost the state's economy as against the industrial sector which is very small in size in Meghalaya. The state has the potential to attract a great number of tourists. Therefore, development and expansion of tourism industry has large scope in the state by utilizing the tourism resources, facilities and services and its untapped market potentials. This can be achieved by creating a strong infrastructure like transportation and communication links at the various important tourist destinations

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