

Religious Tourism and its Potentialities in Bodoland Territorial Region

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Abstract: The Bodoland Territorial Region is an important part of North-Western Assam. The Bodoland Territorial Region have been blessed with mesmerizing natural resources. The Bodoland Territorial Region is also blessed with traditional knowledge, cultural and pilgrimage sites too. Though the region is rich in terms of tourism industry, the region is still not properly explored yet. Due to lack of proper government attention and lack of local community involvement, this region is unexplored till date. The tourism industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. It generates employment opportunities and earns foreign exchanges. Nowadays, Religious tourism is one of the important parts of the tourism industry for most of the part of the world, especially for the countries like India. In Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), religious tourism is in a very initial stage of development. It needs more attention from the tourism department of the state and similarly from the central government to improve its facilities for the tourist or devotees who visits the sites. This paper attempts to highlight various potentialities related to religious tourism in the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam.

Key words: Tourism, Religious Tourism, Bodoland, BTR, Community, Development

INTRODUCTION:

Tourism refers the temporary movement of peoples from outside their normal places of work and permanent residence. Tourism is travel for recreation, religious, leisure, family, business purposes. The tourist attraction of a country can be classified as – *Cultural*: sites and areas of archaeological interest, historical buildings and monuments, places of historical significance, museums, modern culture, political and educational institutions, religious institutions; *Traditions*: festivals, art and handicrafts, music, folklore, native life and customs; *Entertainment*: participation and viewing sports, amusement and recreation park zones and oceanariums, cinemas and theatres, night life and cuisine; *Scenic*: national parks, wildlife, flora and fauna, beach resorts, mountain resorts; *Others*: climate, health resorts or spas, unique characteristics not available elsewhere (Subash and Vasanthagopal, 2013).

India is suitable for every kind of tourism, whether it is adventure tourism like trekking, sky diving or cultural and religious tourism. India is a hub of tourism industry, where a major part of tourism occupies by religious tourism. The religious sites and its customs, traditions attract tourist from the beginning of the trend which is start with a short time period of travel. The northern part of India is mostly covered by hills area. Where every year tourist visited to feel the mesmerizing natural beauty of the particular area. But that northern part of

India is also known for its different religious sites too. The Badrinath Dham, which is situated along the Alakananda River of Chamoli district in Uttarakhand, is considered one of the holiest places of the world. Also, the Vaishno Devi Temple, which is situated at an altitude of 5200 feet and lies in the Trikuta mountains of Jammu, these are few examples of religious sites which attract tourist to visit the northern part of the country. Not only northern part of the country, the North East India is also a place of pilgrimage site too. Where the Kamakhya temple is one of the holiest places of the world lies in the south bank of the mighty Brahmaputra River of Assam.

The study area Bodoland Territorial Region geographically lies between $26^{\circ} 7' 12''$ N to $26^{\circ} 47' 60''$ N latitude and $89^{\circ} 47' 40''$ E to $92^{\circ} 18' 30''$ E longitude. The Bodoland Territorial Region is made up of four districts on the North Western part of Assam below the foothills of the neighbouring country Bhutan. Those districts are Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. These districts are administrated by an elected body known as the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) which came into existence in 9th February 2003 under the terms of a peace agreement. The Bodoland Territorial Region covers an area of almost 8,972 square kilometres. This region is inhabited by the people of Bodo, Assamese and other indigenous communities of Assam. This region is rich in traditional knowledge and its natural resources of tourism. On the other hand, this region of the state is in its initial stage to promote and host religious tourism.

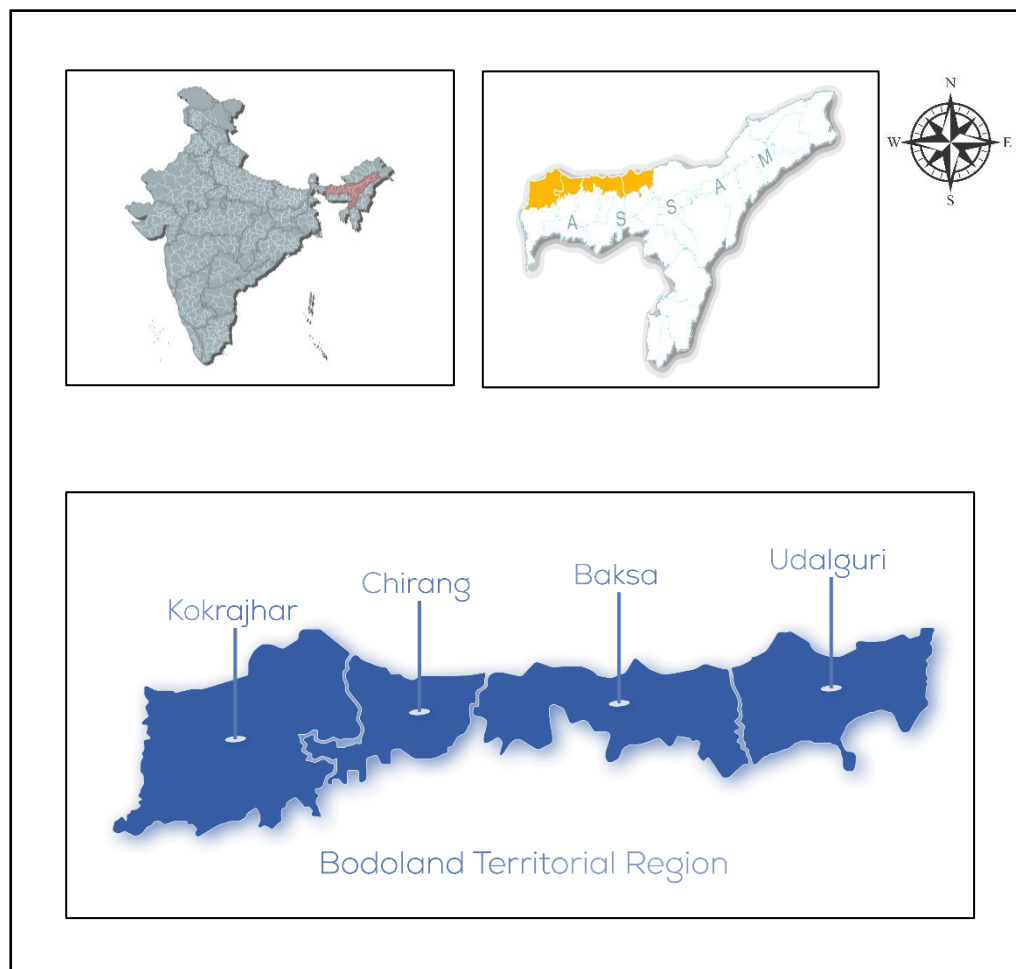


Fig. 1: Map of the study area (without scale).

CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM:

Religious Tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism in the world. Religious tourism is that type of tourism whose participants are motivated either in part or exclusively for religious reasons. Religious tourism is closely connected with holiday and cultural tourism (Rinschede, 1992). The Church Tourism Association (UK) defines religious tourism as ‘promoting best practice in welcoming visitors to places of worship and developing to tourism potential and visitor experience of a unique part of our historical and contemporary sacred heritage.’ In a simple word, religious tourism is that part of tourism where people visit religious or sacred places for their believe in spirituality. After 1990’s, many concepts and theories were developed regarding religious tourism. The three concepts: Pilgrimage, Religious tourism and Spiritual tourism are used together in scientific literature, although they mean different things. Analysis has focused on the differences and similarities between tourists and pilgrims, as well as on the differences among religious tourism, pilgrimage tourism and spiritual tourism (Iliev, 2020).

Religious tourism in Indian tourism industry plays a vital role. India is always known for its mesmerizing natural beauties surrounded by many hill stations and sacred locations. As other parts of the world, all the religions have their own pilgrimage centres which are more or less popular among them. Travel for spiritual performances has been from ancient time to those locations.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The study of tourism was introduced in India quite late. Therefore, the literature on it is quite meager. However, many scholars have written books and articles dealing with various issues on tourism.

1. Rinschede (1992) mentioned in his paper that religious tourism is a form that is exclusively or strongly motivated for religious reasons. Religious tourism is one of the oldest types of tourism and a worldwide phenomenon of religious history, it can be differentiated into various forms. The author differentiated religious tourism according to the criteria of length of stay: either *short term religious tourism* without an overnight stay or *long-term religious tourism* with overnight stay of at least one day.
2. Gupta (2007) has done the research work on the process of tourism planning. Author found that, till 1947, tourism planning was non-existent. Author observes that for sustainable tourism development requires the public sector and the private sector corporate as partners inworking towards a sustainable society.
3. Subash and Vasanthagopal (2013) mentioned travel behaviour of tourists, where they found that majority of the domestic tourists are regular travellers and they made one time visit at the destination earlier. But majority of the foreign tourists are irregular travellers. Authors also examined how District Tourism Promotion Councils has benefited tourism industry.
4. Iliev (2020) analyses the evolution of religious tourism. Author also analyses that how the existing concept, paradigms and practices related to religious tourism have evolved and changed over time. Author says that

religious tourism has expanded into a large and segmented market. Religious tourism is considered as an alternative or specific form of tourism, due to its socio-cultural impacts, its contributions to the local community and sustainable development. The wealthy and heterogeneous supply of religious tourism resources characterise it as one of the fastest growing segments in the tourism industry.

5. Basak & Barman (2023) in their paper gives an account of a tourism in regard to eco-tourism and religious tourism. Authors of this paper tries to bring out the tourism possibilities and challenges of tourism in the state of Assam.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The tourism industry in the Bodoland Territorial Region or BTR is in its initial stage. This industry is growing slowly in this region of the North eastern state of Assam. In that case, religious tourism is one of the best options for the sector to improve its market and attractions. The objective of the paper is to highlight the potentialities of religious tourism in Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam. Also, it will focus different strength and weakness of religious sites situated in the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam.

RESEARCH METHODS:

The Bodoland Territorial Region or BTR is selected for the paper as a study area. The study is analytical as well as descriptive nature. The study for the paper has been conducted based on primary and secondary data sources. The primary sources of data have been collected from the field study, group interview, personal interview, phonetic interview as well as participant observation. There is a limited source of data which are available in any written form about the current study area. So, the secondary sources of data collected from different published books, articles, magazines, newspapers, government records are quite measurable.

For the field study and interviews, two sets of questionnaires were prepared. First set of questionnaires were prepared for the devotees and other tourists who visited the sacred places. Another set of questionnaires were prepared for the host like authorities who maintain the sacred places, tourist guides, tour operators etc.

DATA ANALYSIS:

During field visit and interviews, different data were collected from different sources. The Bodoland Territorial Region have many more or less popular sacred places to visit. But most of them are more popular only among the local visitors. They believe in its spiritual knowledge and customs followed in those sacred places. It can promote religious tourism in the Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam. Some of them are-

a) Mahamaya Shaktipith: The Mahamaya Shaktipith or Mahamaya Dham is one of the most visited sacred places of the study area. It is situated at Bogribari village of Kokrajhar district. Local people believe that this temple was established before 1280 AD by Jodu, son of a timber businessman (Shastri, 1953). The Mahamaya Shaktipith is a temple of Devi Parvati. So that there is also a temple of Pagla baba, which is another name of Lord

Shiva. It is believed that Pagli Maa (Mahamaya) is never stay alone without Pagla baba (Shiva) and also Pagla baba is never stay alone without Pagli Maa. There are many other temples also seen in the campus of the Mahamaya Shaktipith. Those are Kali temple, Manasa temple, Narasingh temple etc.

The devotees who visited the Shaktipith can stay at hotels near the Shaktipith or they can stay at the hotels and guest houses at Kokrajhar town, which is almost 35 kilometres away from the Mahamaya Shaktipith. Tourist can book a cab from Kokrajhar or they can also choose public transportations such as bus and tempos.

b) Mahamaya Snanghat Temple: The Mahamaya Snanghat Temple is almost 3-4 kilometres away from the Mahamaya Dham. It is believed that first time Devi Mahamaya was seen by a timber businessman in this Snanghat. From that time, every timber businessman and others also worshiped here for their improvement of business.

The Mahamaya Snanghat and the Mahamaya Shaktipith were visited lakh of devotees every year. There are total 17 number of temples present inside the Mahamaya Snanghat temple campus including Mahamaya Snanghat Temple. Some of them are- Shiva temple, Manasa temple, Hanuman temple, Navagraha temple, Brahma temple, Bathou temple, Annapurna temple, Adya temple, Chandi temple, Surya temple, Ganesh temple, Govinda temple, Krishna temple, Dirgheswari temple etc. There is a man-made tree seen in the campus of the temple, which is fully artificial, it is the most attractive point for tourist.

c) Pachis Hath Sri Sri Kali Mandir: This is one of the famous sacred places of Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam. This temple is established in 1978 at Kokrajhar district. The temple is almost 90 feet tall and the idol of Maa Kali is 52.5 feet tall. There is a rest house inside the temple campus for devotees which has two separate rooms for ladies and gents. Those rooms are suitable for visitors to take rest. The temple is situated near the National Highway. So that other tourist also visits the temple as a transit visitor. The temple authority runs a purely veg hotel outside the temple campus, which is one of the famous veg hotel of that area.

d) Panbari Kali Mandir: According to local people, the Panbari Kali Temple was established before independence. In 1972, the temple was shifted from Lowarpara village to Panbari village of Chirang district. After that the temple is known as Panbari Kali temple. In 2014, the temple authority decided to upgrade the structure of the temple. After that the temple was started to renovate and developed the structure of the temple. In 2019, the new structure or building of the temple was inaugurated by a local political leader. The structure of the temple building is inspired by South Indian structure of temple. Newly constructed temple building was built by an estimated budget of 1.25 crores Indian rupees. For the temple, different rare stones and 12 idols of Gods and Goddesses were collected from Odisha and Rajasthan.

e) Sannyasi Shiva Dham: The Sannyasi Shiva Dham is situated at Sannyasi Bari, Anchali of Baksa district. The temple is situated near the National Highway 127A, which connect India to the neighbouring country Bhutan. Because of that reason, this temple is very easy to access for the tourist.

Local people of that area believe that the tree under which the temple is situated, almost 300 years old tree. The temple was established in 2007 but local people worshiped under the tree from before independence. The devotees come to visit the temple from all over the state of Assam. People believe that if a person worship in this temple with a pure heart, Lord Shiva definitely fulfils his all hopes. Though there are no facilities to accommodate tourist, this temple has a vast scope to promote religious tourism in Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam.

f) Bhuichampa Devi Temple: This temple is situated at the top of the mountain near Nikashi village of Baksa district. Also, the temple is surrounded by mesmerizing natural beauty of the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary. The Bhuichampa Devi Temple is located near the “no man’s land” area of India and Bhutan.

The Bhuichampa Devi Temple is also known as Maina Pukhuri Temple. There is a pond in the top of the mountain. The name of the pond is Maina Pukhuri. Where the name Maina derived from the bird Maina and Pukhuri is the Assamese word which means pond. It is believed that near the pond, many Maina birds were lived. They cleaned the pond every day. So that the pond called Maina Pukhuri, also the temple is known as the Maina Pukhuri Temple. Devotees need to climb the mountain to reach and worship in the temple.

The Bhuichampa Devi Temple is best place to promote religious tourism as well as nature based sustainable tourism. Tourist can observe different types of birds, butterflies and other wildlife species also.

g) Sripur Devalaya: This temple is located at the north eastern side of the Baksa district. The village where the temple is located is known as Sripurdeor. Earlier the Sripur Devalaya was known as Sri Kamaleswari Devalaya. And after the name of Sripur Devalaya, the village was also named as Sripurdeor village. It is believed that the temple was established between 1606 to 1613 when King Parikkhitnarayana was the ruler of the Koch Kingdom. During the rule of King Parikkhitnarayana, some brahmins visited Kamakhya Dham at Nilachal hill of Pragjyotishpur. They were coming from Kannauj. One of them visited the Kamaleswari Devalaya. After that he discovered three underground idols of Devi Durga, Kali and Lord Shiva. According to locals, these three idols are above 300-400 years old. This has a major opportunity to attract tourist from all over the world.

h) Mahamuni Devalaya: This Devalaya or temple was established in 1569. It is located at Mahalipara village of Udalguri district. In this temple every year different holy rituals are celebrated. The Mahamuni Devalaya is easily accessible for the tourist. The nearest railway station is the Mazbat Railway Station, which is almost 4 kilometres away from the temple. Also, the nearest bus stand which is Orang bus stand, it is about 10 kilometres away from the temple. This temple is one of the oldest temples of Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam.

PROBLEMS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BODOLAND TERRITORIAL REGION:

The Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam has many resources to promote religious tourism. Though there are many prime locations to promote religious tourism, this sector of the industry is still in its very initial stage. This is because of few problems which need to develop as much as possible. Some of them are-

a) Infrastructure: A tourist destination must need to equipped with a good infrastructural facilities like good hotels and lodges in an affordable price for all tourist, emergency services like medical, police and fire services at one call, as well as a good communication facility. All the tourist spots are not very close to the National Highways. Some of the tourist places are situated very remote area, in that case a good communication facility required.

b) Trained Tourist Guide: When a tourist visits a destination, they need a proper and complete information of that particular destination. But Assam has not sufficient amount of trained tourist guide. So that tourist who visited Bodoland Territorial Region or any part of Assam, not able get that much proper information from that visited destination.

c) Communication: Most of the tourist visited any place or destination of Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam faced a communication problem. Apart from the local language Assamese or Bodo, the people who involved in the tourist places or religious destinations of Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam do not have the knowledge of how to speak Hindi, English or any other languages. So, they cannot communicate properly with the tourist.

d) Tourist information centre: The tourist information centre is one of the best options to provide data of a tourist destination. It can promote tourism in its own way by providing different information to the tourist. Lack of proper tourist information office or centre is one of the reasons for the slow growth of religious tourism in Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam.

e) Local People Involvement: It has been seen that, in the Bodoland Territorial Region local people are not that much interested to involve themselves in the tourism industry specially for the sector of religious tourism. Every tourist destination of the world which are more popular, local people plays an important role in those places.

SUGGESTIONS:

To promote religious tourism in Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam, state tourism department and central government need to take few necessary decisions to boost up the speed of development in tourism industry. Following are few suggestions to develop tourism industry in Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam-

1) The tourism department of Assam need to establish more accommodation facilities for tourist in an affordable price.

- 2) The local people of the tourist destination must need to participate in the route to development of those destinations.
- 3) The governmental and non-governmental organizations need to come forward together to promote religious tourism in Bodoland Territorial Region of Assam.
- 4) The department of tourism need to provide proper training to the youth of those area where tourist destinations are present.
- 5) Bodoland Territorial Region has many religious sites which has many proofs of ancient times. Government should protect and conserve those locations develop it for tourism promotion.
- 6) Local government need to develop the infrastructure of the tourist destinations of the study area.

CONCLUSION:

The tourism industry in Bodoland Territorial Region is growing slowly. It has vast potentialities to promote religious tourism. It just needs a proper initiative from the state government as well as central government. The Bodoland Territorial Region has many active NGOs and student union, their active approach towards the religious tourism can change the growth rate of the tourism industry in Bodoland Territorial Region. It can generate employment and earn foreign exchanges also. But it needs time, so proper involvement of local people is highly recommended.

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BIOGRAPHY:

The author of the paper was born in 12th January, 1997. In 2019, he completed his Bachelor of Science in Tourism and Travel Management from Bajali College. After that in 2021, he completed his Master's degree in Tourism Management under Gauhati University. He secured First class first in his Master's degree. Author cleared University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test for Assistant Professor in December term of 2022. Currently he pursuing his PhD from North East Studies department of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam, India.