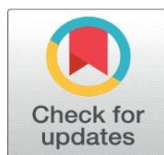


OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR TEMPLE TOURISM IN THE KAMRUP DISTRICT OF ASSAM, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has been a significant economic activity since ancient times. Nowadays, it has become a vital tool for the economic development of a country. Temple tourism is a specific type of tourism that involves traveling to temples primarily for religious purposes, cultural exploration and spiritual experiences. India is a land known for its rich cultural heritage. It has a large number of temples that serve as places of worship and attract millions of tourists and travelers. The State of Assam, situated in the north-eastern corner of the country, has numerous temples and monuments, which stand witness to the great historical and cultural past dating back to the medieval periods. Many ancient Hindu temples of Assam are rooted in mythological legends. The Kamrup district of Assam is home to several temples and shrines. The architectural styles, spiritual environment, fairs and festivals associated with them always attract visitors. Every year, many pilgrims and tourists, both domestic and foreign, visit the place to offer prayer to the deities. Additionally, some come for research purposes. These temples offer significant potential for the development of local tourism. However, they face various challenges. This paper aims to outline the opportunities and challenges associated with the temples in the Kamrup district from a tourism perspective. Additionally, it offers several recommendations to address these challenges.

Keywords: Tourism, Prospects, Problems, Temples, Kamrup

1. INTRODUCTION

Temple tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism. Since ancient times, people have traveled long distances across the country to visit temples in order to receive blessings from Gods and Goddesses and to seek spiritual fulfillment. Ancient rulers patronized temple construction in order to spread the arts, architecture and cultural achievements of their eras. They showcased their devotion to the Gods and Goddesses and attained their spiritual fulfillment by constructing temples and shrines. Emperor Ashoka initiated several human welfare projects, like the construction of roads, digging of wells and canals, the planting of trees for shade and fruit and the establishment of rest houses for travelers along the pathways to the Buddhist holy sites. These efforts made travel for religious purposes easier and more comfortable. Such a trip to a temple may be referred to as temple tourism, which has an impact on every aspect of people's lives. Temple tourism has brought a revolutionary change in the socio-economic sector by creating employment opportunities for hundreds of individuals.

Temple or spiritual tourism has a long history in Assam, with thousands of temples dedicated to various Gods and Goddesses scattered throughout the state. The Kamrup district, in particular, has a long-standing tradition of worshipping Gods and Goddesses that dates back to ancient times. These temples hold significant socio-economic importance. In addition to attracting spiritual tourism, they foster economic growth, support cultural preservation and contribute to community welfare in the district.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are-

- 1) To study the opportunities for temple tourism in the Kamrup District of Assam.
- 2) To highlight the challenges for temple tourism in the district.
- 3) To propose some recommendations to overcome the challenges on the basis of findings of the study.

3. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the study is analytical and descriptive. For this study, information has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data are collected through field surveys, which included observations and interviews, while the secondary data are gathered from various relevant books, magazines, journals etc. A structured questionnaire has been used to collect the necessary information.

4. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE STUDY AREA

The study was conducted in the Kamrup district of Assam, India. It is an administrative district of Assam formed by dividing the former Kamrup district into two in 2003, with the other being the Kamrup Metropolitan district. It is situated on the north bank of the mighty Brahmaputra. It covers an area of 4,345 sq. km. and has a total population of 1,517,542 according to the 2011 census. From a geographical point of view, the district is located between 25°46'/N to 26°49'/N latitude and 90°48'/E to 91°50'/E longitude. It is bounded by the Baksa, Nalbari and Barpeta districts on the north; the Kamrup Metropolitan and Darrang districts on the east; the Nalbari and Goalpara districts on the west and Meghalaya on the south.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Vijay Kr. Gupta (1987), in his book "Tourism in India", has given all necessary information for tourists and travelers. He has made a clear discussion on the places of interest of India, including the historical monuments and pilgrimage places.

"Pavitra Asam" by Maheswar Neog (1991) records and highlights ancient relics, temples, *satras* and mosques of Assam.

"The Blessed Land" is a monumental work by Prabin Ch. Das (1999) in which he has clearly outlined the temples and the festivals associated with them in the Hajo area.

"Hajo Hena Nama Pabitra Uttam" is a descriptive account of holy places of Hajo Revenue Circle under Kamrup district of Assam by Harendra Kalita (1999). This is an important work that helps in research activities regarding temple tourism.

Gajendra Kumar Adhikary (2001), in his book "A History of the Temples of Kamrup and their Management", gives an overall idea about the present status of all the temples of the Kamrup district of Assam and their management system.

In "Tourism in Assam: Trends and Potentialities", Prasanta Bhattacharya (2004) has explained the growth and development of tourism as well as potential tourist destinations, including the temples of Assam and Kamrup district and the trend of the flow of tourists to the state. Additionally, he has made some recommendations to boost tourism in the state.

“Paryatanar Ruprekha”, a textbook on History written by Mahesh Ch. Bora and Dr. Shila Bora (2005), contains all aspects of tourism in North-East India. One can have a clear discussion of the places of historical and religious significance in the region.

The book “Punyabhumi Asom”, written by Navajyoti Dev Choudhury (2013), gives a district-wise vivid description of the religious institutions, including the temples of Assam.

Kabita Konch (2019), in her research paper entitled “Prospects and Problems of Religious Tourism in Dhakuakhana Sub-division of Lakhimpur District of Assam”, discusses the prospects and problems of religious tourism in the study area. For micro-level investigation, four religious places have been taken, viz., Basudev Thaan Naruah Satra, Gopalpur Satra, Govindapur Satra, and Harhi Devalaya.

S.B. Anilkumar and Pappaka Adinarayana (2019), in their paper “Religious Tourism in India: Issues and Challenges”, highlight the religious tourism in India, indicating the famous holy places of different religions in India and address the key issues and challenges in the tourism industry.

6. DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

Temples are important centres of worship, spiritual learning and community gathering in Hindu culture. Beyond worship, temples play a vital role in preserving the culture and traditions of a region. Besides devotees, they also attract historians, archaeologists and researchers. As a result, they become the significant tourist destinations. A brief discussion on some temples of the area is given below in the context of tourism.

6.1. MADAN KAMDEV TEMPLE

One of the most important tourist attractions of the Kamrup district is the Madan Kamdev temple, located in Baihata Chariali, near Katanipara, about 30 km from Guwahati. The temple is now in ruins and is situated atop the Dewangiri hill. The destroyed parts of the temple are preserved in a nearby museum. The carvings depict the legendary tales of Kamdeva, the Hindu God of love. An image of Uma-Maheswara embracing each other is the main deity of the temple. Dedicated to Lord Siva, it is one of the most significant archaeological sites of Assam. As per archaeological evidence, the temple belongs to the 9th century A.D. (Sarma, 1988, pp. 72-73). Various festivals are celebrated at this temple throughout the year, among which Madan Trayodashi Tithi, Maha Sivratri and Ganesh Chaturdashi are worth mentioning.

6.2. HAYAGRIBA-MADHAVA TEMPLE

Hayagriba-Madhava is one of the most important temples of Hajo, the city of temples. The temple is situated at the top of the Manikuta hillock, or Manikutachal. This shrine was established by the saint Urba (Neog, 2008, p. 271). The old temple was destroyed by king Kalapahar and it was rebuilt by the Koch king Raghudeva Narayana (Gait, 1906, p. 61) in 1583 A.D. Buddhists from Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and China usually come here during winter. They claim the image of Lord Madhava as Buddha and call it Mahamuni. Daily rituals are performed with an offering of *bhoga* (cooked food offered to the Gods) in the name of the deity. Festivals like Gobinda Deul, Raja Phakuwa, Baruni, Krishna Janmastami, Amati, Sayana Ekadashi, Utthana Ekadashi etc. are observed in the temple with great devotion.

6.3. DOUL GOVINDA TEMPLE

It is situated just by the side of the mighty river Brahmaputra at Rajaduar, North Guwahati. The temple is mainly devoted to Lord Krishna. Besides, there is a Namghar (community prayer hall) along with the temple within the same premises. Besides daily rituals, Doulotsav is celebrated every year with much pomp and gaiety. Festivals like Krishna Janmastami and Maghi Purnima are also observed in the temple. It is directly connected by ferries from Guwahati.

6.4. ASWAKLANTA TEMPLE

This famous temple was constructed by king Siva Singha in 1720 A.D. It is located on a rocky hillock along the banks of the river Brahmaputra in North Guwahati. It is said that when Lord Krishna was on his way to kill Narakasura, the

horse of his chariot became tired in this place and hence, it is named Aswaklanta or Aswakranta. Two forms of Lord Vishnu, viz., Kurmajanardana and Anantasayee Vishnu, are worshipped here. It is linked by regular ferry services with the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Doulotsava, Janmastami and Asokastami are observed here.

6.5. DIRGHESWARI TEMPLE

This temple is situated on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra on a hillock named Dirgheswari in the Rangmahal area of North Guwahati. PanidiHINGIYA Barphukan, under the patronage of king Siva Sinha, built the temple in A.D. 1735 (Adhikary, 2008, p. 69). The idol of Goddess Durga is found in the *garbha-griha* (sanctum sanctorum). Every year, Durga Puja is celebrated, in which devotees from far and near come to have blessings from the deity.

6.6. GOPESWAR DEVALAYA

Gopeswar temple is an ancient Siva temple located in Deuduar village of Kamrup district by the 52 No. National Highway. It is near the significant archaeological site of the Madan Kamdev temple. The temple was established during the reign of king Siva Sinha in about 1725 A.D. (Choudhury, 2013, p. 153). Daily rituals are performed in the name of Lord Siva. It is also known as Gupteswar devalaya.

6.7. GANESH TEMPLE

This temple is situated at the foot of the Aggyathuri hill by the side of the Hajo-Guwahati road. An idol of Lord Ganesha is carved out on a large stone here. Established in 1960, the stone-carved idol of Lord Ganesha was discovered by a *babaji* (a hermit) named Bhebela (Choudhury, 2013, p. 156). Every year, Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated with joy and enthusiasm.

6.8. CANDIKA TEMPLE

The temple is situated at Chaygaon, about 40 km south-west from Guwahati by the 37 No. National Highway. It was built by Tarun Duvara Barphukan during the reign of Siva Sinha in 1725 A.D. The presiding deity of the temple is Candika. Daily rituals are performed, and Durga Puja and Candi Puja are celebrated in the temple every year.

6.9. PINGALESWAR DEVALAYA

It is situated on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra in Pingaleswar village, Kamrup, at about 45 km from Guwahati. It is regarded as an *ardhanariswara* (half-Siva and half-Parvati) temple. However, there is no image of Ardhanarishvara in the *garbha-griha*. Instead, there is a Sivalinga here. Daily rituals, including *bhoga*, are performed here with great devotion. Sivaratri is celebrated with great joy and enthusiasm every year.

6.10. BASUDEVA DEVALAYA

It is the most famous temple of Kulhati, a village about 25 km away from Guwahati. This temple is located at the foot of the Kulhati or Dhaneswari hill. A stone idol of Basudeva, i.e., Lord Krishna, is worshipped here. Regular puja is offered with *naivedya* (an offering made of gram, rice etc. before an idol) and *bhoga*. On the full-moon day of the month of Magh, the Maghi-purnima festival is observed with a two- or three-day-long programme. Doulotsav, Janmastami etc. are also observed here.

6.11. AGNIBANESWARA DEVALAYA

This temple is situated to the east of the Dalibari village at the foot of the Agni hill, or Aggyathuri hill, some 15 km away from Guwahati. King Bana built a doul (a temple) here and placed a Sivalinga for the devotees during his visit to Kamrupa. Since then, it has been called the Agnibaneswara devalaya. The natural scenery of the place attracts the pilgrims. Sivaratri and Doulotsav are observed here in a religious atmosphere. Historians opine that the temple was constructed by Swargadeu Siva Sinha in 1730 A.D.

6.12. ABHAYPUR GANESH TEMPLE

This temple is situated at Abhaypur village at the foot of the Shiladwar hill near Hajo. Devotees perform congregational prayer offering *gaji* (a mixture of uncooked rice, pulse, gram etc.), *ladu* (a ball of powdered rice, scooped coconut and molasses) etc. Every year, Ganesh Puja is celebrated on the day of Ganesh Chaturthi with joy and enthusiasm. It is a good picnic spot, as the natural scenery of the area is very beautiful.

6.13. HAR-GAURI THAAN

About 25 km away from Guwahati, Har-Gauri than is situated in the village of Tetelia. Inside the temple, a piece of stone is worshipped as the Lord Har (Siva), the small piece of stone towards the left as the Goddess Gauri (Parvati) and the stone piece towards the right as Kartika. The image of Ganesha is supposed to be the rock that stands between Har and Gauri. There is a stone horse in front of the main image. According to a local saying, Har-Parvati visits this area at night on this horse. Devotees from different parts, far and near, visit the than. Sivaratri is observed with much pomp and grandeur.

6.14. GOPAL THAAN

It is a worshipping place of Lord Krishna, situated in the Banshor village, about 26 km away from Guwahati by the Guwahati-Sualkuchi Road. At present, then is a great attraction for the devotees in and around the state. Every year, the Suwari festival is celebrated here on the 2nd day of the month of *Bohag* of the Assamese calendar with great pomp and joy.

6.15. BHRINGESWARA DEVALAYA

This shrine is situated to the west of Banshor village at the foot of the Bhangara hill of the Sanpara range. It is a Siva temple and was established around 1730 A.D. (Neog, 2008, p. 275). On the main altar of the devalaya, there is a stone-cut idol, and it is covered with a large stone. The stone is worshipped as the back of Lord Siva and it looks like the back of a tortoise. Daily rituals, including *bhoga*, are performed here with great devotion. Sivaratri, Doulotsav, Janmastami etc. are observed here with much pomp.

6.16. DHARESWARA DEVALAYA

This holy shrine is located to the west of the Hatimura hill of Bamundi village, about 34 km west of Guwahati. This ancient Siva temple was established around 1730 AD during the reign of king Siva Singha (Neog, 2008, p. 273). Here, daily worship is done with *bhoga* offering. The tradition of worshipping with wood apple leaves rather than flowers is very significant. Sivaratri and Doulotsav are observed here with great enthusiasm.

6.17. SIDDHESWARA DEVALAYA

This devalaya is situated to the west of the silk village Sualkuchi, some 29 km west of Guwahati. It was built during the rule of Ahom king Siva Singha in 1729 A.D. (Neog, 2008, p. 275). There is a Sivalinga along with an idol of Lord Vishnu in the devalaya. The Sivalinga is worshipped as Siddheswara (Lord Siva). Besides, the statues of goddesses like Durga, Saraswati and Lakshmi are also found in the devalaya. Daily rituals are performed with an offering of *bhoga* in the name of the deities. In this devalaya, festivals like Sivaratri, Durga Puja, Doul, Buddha Purnima etc. are observed with great eagerness and zeal.

6.18. GANESHA BIGRAH

It is situated in the easternmost corner of Sualkuchi near Ghatia hill. This ancient Hindu shrine was established by king Ratnapala (Deka, 2020, p. 239). There is a stone-sculptured statue of Lord Ganesha along with a stone-built statue of Har-Gauri on the left and a Sivalinga on the right. Daily rituals are performed with an offering of *naibedya*. Ganesh Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Doulotsav, Kishna Janmastami etc. are observed here.

6.19. LAHESWARI THAAN

It is in the Laheswari chaponi (island formed by a river) in Bamundi. Every year, on the first day of Magh, the riverine villagers arrange homa-yajna (an oblation of fire) in association with congregational prayer in this thaan.

Apart from the above-mentioned temples, thaans and devalayas, some other ancient shrines are also found in different parts of the Kamrup district, which are of great significance in the tourism context.

From the above discussions, it has been seen that the historic place of Kamrup has tremendous potentialities for developing and promoting temple tourism as well as generating income and employment opportunities. Every year, a large number of tourists, both domestic and foreign, visit the temples for different purposes.

Temple tourism plays a significant role in the socio-economic and religious lives of the people of the study area. It has become an important source of employment. It provides job opportunities to a large number of unemployed youths directly or indirectly. Moreover, tourism helps in maintaining international peace and harmony among different religious groups. Hajo, a famous village under Kamrup district, is a living example of unity and religious tolerance and tourism adds a new dimension in maintaining this harmony between the Hindu and the Muslim communities. Moreover, in order to develop the tourism industry, especially temple tourism, protection and preservation of the above-mentioned temples and shrines of the area is a must.

7. CHALLENGES OF TEMPLE TOURISM IN KAMRUP

The district has a lot of potential, but it has not been able to develop tourism. The tourists as well as devotees face some challenges while they visit the temples. Among them, the significant challenges are:

- 1) Language problems for communication.
- 2) Absence of trained tourist guides and travel agencies.
- 3) Inadequate road connectivity and poor network facility.
- 4) Shortage of decent hotels and lodges near the temples.
- 5) Dearth of basic amenities (such as pure drinking water, well-maintained toilets, first aid, parking facilities etc.) in the temple compound.
- 6) Insufficient publicity through various print and electronic media.
- 7) Lack of awareness among the local people.
- 8) Absence of local entrepreneurship. Even outsider entrepreneurs are seen not to be interested in this field.
- 9) Lack of cooperation among private and government agencies.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Local youths should be trained as tourist guides so that they can communicate with the tourists and travelers fluently in any language.
- 2) The local people, appointed in the temple, are required to be trained for performing their duties properly and providing quality services.
- 3) The workers in the hotels, restaurants and transportation should be well trained.
- 4) Adequate road and communication networks and car-parking facilities should be made available.
- 5) Sufficient banking facilities and the availability of proper functioning ATMs should be made.
- 6) All forms of media should come forward to promote tourism in the area.

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- 7) Proper arrangements can be developed to showcase the myths, legends and stories related to the temples within the same compound using audio-visual aids.
 - 8) Short films and documentaries may be prepared on the temples and its festivals to promote tourism.
 - 9) Local people need to be made aware of the customs and traditions of the temple and their preservation.

9. CONCLUSION

Kamrup district is recognized as a significant destination for temple tourism in Assam. As a multifaceted activity, tourism plays a crucial role in the socio-economic development of the region. Many individuals support their families by participating in various tourism-related activities. Through well-planned development of temple tourism, the resources of the area can be preserved. Furthermore, it is our primary duty to protect all temples and tourism resources for both tourists and future generations. This effort will ultimately contribute to the development of the district.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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