

ABSTRACT

All over the world, tourism has emerged as a gigantic sector. This growth of travelling of the masses over the last couple of centuries has given rise to the gigantic tourism industry, which has become the global phenomenon today. In the global context, many nations including developed and developing are actively engaged in the tourism sector, as it creates a gamut of benefits like employment opportunities, foreign exchange earnings, infrastructure development, contribution to the economy as in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and per capita income, socio-cultural heritage preservation, conservation of natural resources etc. Tourism engagement not only has positive impacts but also a lot of negative impacts, hence cautious planning and monitoring is required and initiatives like sustainable development, responsible tourism, community-based tourism (CBT) approach and alternative tourism forms is more desirable to mitigate or check the negative impacts. In Indian context, rural tourism initiatives has a huge potential, where about 68.84% of the population residing in the 6,38,000 villages are dependent on agriculture and allied activities and are eagerly looking at alternative livelihood opportunities. In India, rural tourism initiatives is recognised as a pivotal tool to catalyst the development of the rural community and the rural economy. Though agriculture and allied activities are the main sources of livelihood, but recent trends have indicated that this sector is not yielding the expected benefits due to various issues, hence rural tourism initiatives can be one of the alternate source of livelihood in most of the tourist centric rural areas.

The emergence of alternative tourism was due to the extensive negative impacts caused due to the onslaught of mass tourism activities on destinations. Under the umbrella of alternative tourism, small scale, nature, agro, rural, village, eco, ethnic, food, wine tourisms etc are incorporated, so that they are in sync with natural, social and community ethos without lessening the economic benefits. Alternative tourism forms are regarded as a key element in tourism development as it highlights on preservation and conservation of natural, socio-cultural and heritage sites of a destination and as a result the concept of sustainable tourism was initiated and played a pivotal role in tourism development. There has been a rapid growth of alternative tourism forms primarily due to the positive environmental and social impacts that sustains the aesthetic and socio-cultural ethics of a destination. Alternative tourism forms not only

control adverse environmental and social impacts but also fosters development of other sectors of the local economy and also encourages the participation of the local host communities in the tourism development process. Alternative tourism activities are directed to be friendly to the environment and to appreciate the cultural heritage of the host communities and to have a meaningful enriching engagement between the guest and the host communities. Rural tourism is the most renowned alternative tourism form in context to product diversification and sustainability approach. Rural tourism encompasses different forms of tourism like ecology tourism, agriculture tourism, farm tourism, village tourism, eco-tourism, wine tourism etc and thus strengthens regional development.

Meghalaya a small, picturesque state, nestled strategically in the north-eastern part of India, sharing international boundaries with Bangladesh, has tremendous scope for tourism initiatives. Though the state known as the “Abode of Clouds” has been recognized as one of the major tourist centres of the north-eastern region, but it has not been able to attract as many tourists it had perceived with the abundance of natural tourism resources and the rich cultural heritage of the tribal indigenous inhabitants. Meghalaya is bestowed with abundant natural resources such as cascading crystal-clear water bodies and waterfalls, deep gorges and canyons, diverse flora and fauna, high cliffs and gentle valleys, gigantic rocks, sacred groves, etc. About 79.92 percent of Meghalaya’s population resides in the rural areas in the 6026 villages and majority of the rural local community’s residing in these villages have poor financial conditions, hence there is tremendous scope for rural tourism initiatives in the state which could result in improving the economic conditions of the marginalised local communities and holistic development of the rural areas and local communities. Ri-Bhoi district, one of the prominent districts of Meghalaya bounded in the north by Kamrup and on the East by the Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. The district has 4 blocks and 649 villages with headquarters in Nongpoh, which is only 40 km away from Guwahati city and 50 km from Shillong. The district is connected with national highway 40 and is the main entry point to the state. This research study is based on 4 blocks of Ri-Bhoi district to understand the pros and cons of the opportunities and challenges of rural tourism and its impact to sustain the economic, socio-cultural and biodiversity of the Ri-Bhoi district.

Based on the review of literature, there seems to be many studies on tourism, and it has become a popular study area for many researchers across the globe. Through extensive

review of tourism literatures, it was observed that there was not much significant study on to evaluate the impacts of rural tourism on the local community development in the study area i.e., the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. Rural tourism can be an important tool to revitalize the rural areas and creating opportunities for alternative livelihoods for the rural folks. In India context, a lot of studies on rural tourism has been carried out in the country and in the northeast but very few related studies on niche rural tourism are conducted in the state of Meghalaya. Existing tourism literatures have revealed that there are more studies to entice tourists and improving the product rather than on the influences of tourism on the lives of the local rural community. However, from the tourism literatures accessed and analysed there has not been much significant study on rural tourism or alternative tourism in Meghalaya's Ri-Bhoi district. As a result, a study highlighting the prospects and challenges of rural tourism initiatives along with the impacts on rural communities and rural economy of Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya has been conducted.

The research approach adopted by the researcher is both deductive and quantitative. The researcher has conducted an extensive survey in the four blocks of Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya with help of a well-structured questionnaire to explore and identify the prospects and challenges of rural tourism initiatives and to understand the perception of the rural communities towards rural tourism development vis-a-vis economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts.

Following the completion of data collection from the respondents of the study area, the data was screened properly to check for any missing value or any other abnormalities. This was followed by coding the data and entering in IBM-SPSS 25.0 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). After that data was analysed to arrive at rational inferences by testing the research hypothesis. Descriptive analysis was carried out to assess the mean scores, standard deviation, Kolmogorov-Smirnov, and Shapiro-Wilk data normality test were conducted on the data to assess the spread and the normality of distribution of the data. Factor Analysis was carried out to assess the underlying aspects of the impacts of rural tourism on rural community development and the challenges of rural tourism development. To ascertain the affiliation between the various variables a Cross-Tabulation analysis and Chi-Square test of association was conducted to arrive at inferences and validate the hypothesis formulated. Also, percentages were used to examine the demographic profile of the respondents.

The study reveals that the state of Meghalaya is a popular tourist circuit hub of the northeast. Out of the twelve districts of the state, tourism is mostly centred and developed in the East Khasi Hills (EKH) and some of the adjoining districts. However, recent initiatives from the tourism stake holders both Government and private has initiated the development of tourism in all the prospective districts of the state. Tourism in Meghalaya is not seasonal business anymore, there seems to be a consistent footfall of tourist foot fall throughout the year. New tourist destinations and tourism related service infrastructure has been developed in the state so as to cater to the ever-increasing size of the tourist population. During summer peak season, the state does witness the flow of tourist beyond it carrying capacity, resulting to issues thus highlighting improper planning and development of the tourism sector in the state. Apart from conventional tourism forms of leisure, the state has been witnessing a steady growth of Alternative tourism forms and Business tourism endeavours. The recent opening of two five-star hotels in the capital city of Shillong also highlights the outlook of the tourism planners from being merely low budget high volume trajectory to high value low volume. Ri-Bhoi district is endowed with abundant tourism resources with picturesque landscape and serenity. Nongpoh town is the district headquarter and is about fifty kilometres from the capital city of Meghalaya, Shillong and about forty kilometres from the capital city of Assam, Dispur. The National Highway (NH) forty passes right through the centre of the district. The local road networks are all well connected to NH 40 within the district, and it has been observed that it plays a significant role in developing the local economies of the blocks and overall livelihood opportunities of the district. As the accessibility within the district is well connected, rural tourism initiatives in the various blocks of the district can be initiated or existing initiatives could be further developed. Since majority of the district land is under forest cover and cultivable waste land and groves there is tremendous prospects for developing tourism initiatives in the village levels so that it benefits the local economy and the local community and the tourists visiting these rural tourism circuits can have the experience of typical village agrarian rural life. A lot of agricultural activities is supported by the district's drainage pattern hence incorporation of rural tourism initiatives along with agricultural activities will give additional livelihood opportunities for rural masses of the district. As Ri-Bhoi district experiences both temperate and tropical climate, the overall climatic condition of the district favours a variety of tourism initiatives. Since rural tourism initiatives are always set up in small scale, there

is dual benefit as firstly the fragile eco-system is not obliterated due to extensive tourism development and secondly the cost of investments for rural tourism start up is moderately low, which can encourage local entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. Since initiations of rural tourism initiatives in the study area, it has resulted in economic benefits for the residents and the standard of living has increased and the local economy has been enhanced along with the development of basic infrastructures. There has been increasing demand for the local products like farm products, handloom, handicraft, and local indigenous food delicacies. The youths of the study area are motivated to be engaged in rural tourism initiatives and other tourism related activities thus migration from rural to urban areas are checked to some extent. There has been meaningful engagement and cultural exchange between tourists and the local host communities.

Rural tourism enhances & revitalize community pride and has given a cultural identity to the place and the community. Rural tourism initiatives have resulted in preserving the natural resources and landscapes. Rural tourism initiatives at village level have encouraged to adopt renewable & energy saving technologies. Developing rural tourism in a rural area can be both rewarding and challenging. While rural areas often possess natural beauty, cultural heritage, and authentic rural experiences that attract tourists seeking a break from urban life, there are several challenges like infrastructure and accessibility, limited services and amenities, seasonal nature, lack of investment, skills and training, marketing, networking and promotion, lack of financial resources, etc. that need to be addressed for successful and sustainable rural tourism development. To overcome these challenges, it's important for rural communities, local governments, and stakeholders to collaborate and create comprehensive, sustainable tourism development plans that consider environmental, socio-cultural, and economic factors.