CHAPTER - 6

PROSPECTS OF TOURISM IN NILACHAL HILLS

Tourism is the most important industry in the service sector of the Indian economy. It is one of the world's fastest growing industry and it can play role in accelerating the economic development of the country. Tourism was first introduced in Indian Economy in the Second Five-Year Plan, in the early sixties Government of India took Schemes and plans to facilitate and develop the tourist destinations which were most commonly and frequently visited by foreign tourists. In the early 80's of the 19th century gradually emphasis was given upon the conservation of natural environment along with promoting tourism. It was accorded the status of industry during the Seventh Five-Year Plan.

Tourism is the most flourishing industry of the present era. Being a uniquely styled labour-intensive industry, it provides different services that is generally sought-for by the tourists in a destination. Another interesting aspect of this upcoming flourishing industry is that it generates foreign currency as tourists spent a huge amount of money in the destination.

The Government of Assam tried to formulate a tourism policy in 1987, however, the first tourism policy was formulated on 25th February , 2009 and was named the "Tourism Policy of Assam, 2008". It was formulated in the line of National Tourism Policy 2002. Apart from this, the Assam Tourism Development Corporation Limited, in short, the ATDC, was incorporated on 9th June, 1988 and registered under the Companies Act 1956 vide no. 02-03006 of 1988-89. The State Government of Assam has promoted and set up the Corporation for growth and development of tourism in Assam. The ATDC has contributed a lot towards the development of tourism industry in the Nilachal Hills, starting from the establishment of tourist lodge to the construction of watch towers, view points, etc. in the whole of the region.

The Nilachal Hills with its ancient temples and archaeological sites, aesthetic environment, spiritual features, great scenic beauty, unexplored areas, natural vegetation, cultural heritage etc., in addition to the amazing sight of the Guwahati city
and the mighty river Brahmaputra, the whole region offers huge potential for the growth of various forms of tourism. However, this can happen following a sustainable approach, i.e., in the form of sustainable tourism.

Sustainable approach is a way of visiting a place as a tourist and trying to make positive impacts on the environment. Tourism is the fastest growing industry in developing countries (TIES, 2009). But tourism is also the major environmental burden in some of its destinations (Tubb, 2003). This is because, tourism is often associated with negative impact which may include the vices like pollution, deforestation, habitat loss, indigenous culture loss and even long lasting loss to the environment to any region. Thus, to survive from all these vices, a certain type of tourism is desirable as it could contribute to the conversation of biological diversity, environmental education to the tourists, protection of the local cultures, economic development for the inhabitants and provide funding for maintaining their environmental values (Cottrell and Vaske, 2006). All these expectations may be fulfilled by the form of tourism which is popularly called Sustainable Tourism. Sustainable Tourism may be taught of as "tourism which is in a form which can maintain its viability in an area for an indefinite period of time (Butler, 1993). It implies the right to tourism and to freedom of tourist movements, satisfaction of economic, social and aesthetic needs, with the maintenance of the characteristics of the natural and social environment and cultural and historical heritage (Vucic et al, 2002); (Stankovic, 2004).

Sustainable tourism has three key components, sometimes referred to as the "triple bottom lines" (International Ecotourism Society, 2004) :-

1. Environmentally, it has a low impact on natural resources. It minimises damage to the environment and ideally tries to benefit the environment.

2. Socially and culturally, it does not harm the social structure or culture of the community where it is located. It respects the cultures and traditions of the local community.

3. Economically, it contributes to the economic well-being of the community, generating sustainable and equitable income for the local communities.
Nilachal Hills has seen social and economic development in the form of infrastructural development as discussed in the earlier chapter. And considering the economic development and improvement in transport and communication network, including the establishment of hotels and lodges, the materialistic life of the people living in and around the Kamakhya temple complex can be said to have improved. However, due to the mishandling of the scope of tourism, the original social customs are gradually depleting. This is also a result of commercialisation (to some extent) of the Ambubachi mela celebrated annually in the region. According to a local resident, due to this commercialisation, some of the priests are not even aware of the history and culture of this ancient temples and proper rituals and traditions of the region. Most of the people of the new generation has included themselves with the temple just for the sake of profession and earning.

Being a temple-oriented tourist destination, most of the rituals, chants etc are in Sanskrit language. However, most of the people, associated with the temple don't even know the meaning of the slokas or prayer they utter in Sanskrit language. The continuation, of this attitude of the local people will one day destroy the whole spirituality of the region and gradually the entire culture will suffer a major setback. But there is a scope for the prevention of such an undesired situation by encouraging the sustainable form of tourism. Tourism should not commercialise the age-old traditions and customs of the region. Instead it should help in preserving them.

Following such an approach, it has been observed that there is a scope of developing some other types of tourism in the Nilachal Hills, which has been discussed in this chapter.

6.1 Ecotourism

The rise of the term ecotourism has been relatively rapid. In 1970, the term did not exist and now more than 40 years later, the term ecotourism has become the subject of much debate (Ramchurjee, 2014). Although the origins of the term ‘ecotourism’ are not entirely clear, it was developed within the atmosphere of the environmental movement in the 1970s and 1980s (Blamey, 2001). Since its inception, ecotourism has consistently grown, and is now widely considered the fastest growing sub-component of
The growing interest of people for environment and trips oriented towards fresh air, in addition to the growing dissatisfaction towards mass tourism, highlighted to the tourism industry a need for ecotourism. Besides, the understanding and the agreement with the principles of nature preservation and durability for a growing portion of the population took part in the evolution of the term "ecotourism".

The pioneer of the concept of ecotourism is usually cited to be as Budowski (1976). In his article “Tourism and Environmental Conservation: Conflict, Coexistence or Symbiosis?” Budowski admits that the relation between tourism and natural environment tends to be in conflict, but believes that there exists a possibility for a relation based upon mutual benefits. His description of the possible symbiotic relation that could follow from this corresponds to our contemporary idea of ecotourism.

Ecotourism is often considered as a form of tourism with "a strong motivation". There is no universal definition for ecotourism. It is usually considered as a "tourism favorable to the environment", which is, on a practical level, variously interpreted according to the country. One of the most accepted definition of ecotourism has been provided by Martha Honey as “travel to fragile, pristine and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the traveler; provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights".

According to the World Conservation Union (1996), it can be defined as "... the visit of natural environments remained relatively intact... with a low negative impact... including a socio-economical implication for the local populations which is at the same time active and beneficial".

Ecotourism is an industry that stands to make a lot of money from tourists that are seeking environmentally friendly vacations or ecologically friendly activities. The
money from ecotourism could be used to preserve nature, wildlife, species and earth's natural resources as well as help local people with access to civilization and education.

Since the 1980's ecotourism has been considered a critical endeavour by environmentalists, so that future generations may experience destinations relatively untouched by human intervention (Martha, 2008).

When we observe the prevalent conditions of our study area, most of the characteristic features are observed which supports the growth of ecotourism in the Nilachal Hills. Though the inflow of tourists has been increasing in the Nilachal Hills in the past decades, still it can be said that it is rich in natural beauty with pollution comparatively less than many other tourist spots of Assam and India as a whole (Fig. 6.1). Apart from the presence of the temples and the religious aspects, now-a-days, people also visits the region in great numbers due to its scenic beauty and the existence of vegetation cover with a great diversity of flora and fauna (as mentioned in earlier chapter). This has been revealed during our interview with the tourists during the course of the primary survey. This in turn, can attract researchers, botanists, zoologists etc. contributing to the students and researchers alike in the field of knowledge and education.

![Fig. 6.1: View from Nilachal Hills](image)

With the growing awareness among the masses, people are more concerned for the protection of the environment so much so that when interviewed personally almost 68% of the tourists stated that they will prefer to stay in eco-friendly accommodations which will help in reducing the pollution and environmental degradation in the region.
As the dominant factor of the tourism sector in the Nilachal Hills is the existence of temples and archaeological and sculptural evidences which represents our age old cultures and traditions of the local people in particular and our country in general, the prime effort of both the local community and the tourists is the propagation of the age-old cultures and traditions as well as preserving them which is the identity of the whole region (Fig. 6.2).

Fig. 6.2: Sculptural remnants found in Nilachal Hills kept at the compound of Mahakaal Ganesh

Apart from the above aspects, the local community has been a great factor in the tourism industry. Being employed in the management of the temples and getting direct or indirect benefits from the temples of the region, there is a great scope of further well-being of the host community through increased employment and generation of earning sources along with the preservation of the cultural heritage of the region.

Ecotourism generates a positive impact on the destination's environment. In the early days of tourism, the tours in the natural destinations were organised by the non-natives. Non-natives were not very concerned about the environment and remained focused on the business side of the industry. It was the major factor that led local community's involvement in the development and operation of ecotourism at a destination. Local communities, organisations and government bodies were made aware of the damages from tourism activities. They started collaborating to establish sustainable activities and awareness programmes by engaging local people and organisations in the operational part of the local tourism. Hence, ecotourism provided powers to the locals for leading, operating, managing the activities in order to enhance the socio-economic conditions of the destination (Cole, 2004); (Ramachurjee, 2014).
This concept is clearly depicted in the Nilachal Hills from the fact that till 2015, the management of the temples of the region was being done by the Kamakhya Debottar Board and after that till date, by the Doloi Samaj, both of which is constituted by the torch-bearers of the local community.

One of the fundamental elements of ecotourism is that, benefits should accrue to the local community. This may involve the employment of local guides, the purchase of provisions and services locally and the use of local facilities (Ivanov & Webster, 2013). During my field survey (interview with the local people) it has been found that though the local community is engaged in the economic aspects supporting tourism, yet the concept of local guide has been terribly neglected, may be due to lack of proper initiative. However, most of the interviewed local youths are interested to take up this option as a profession, if proper guidance is provided.

Thus, it is seen that there is a great scope of developing ecotourism in the Nilachal Hills covering the conservation and preservation of nature, ecosystem, biodiversity, cultural heritage as well as well-being and inclusiveness of local community in the industry.

6.2 Adventure tourism

Adventure tourism is a type of niche tourism involving exploration or travel to remote areas, where the traveller should expect the unexpected. Adventure tourism is rapidly growing in popularity as tourists seek unusual holidays, different from the typical beach vacation. Mountaineering expeditions, trekking, bungee jumping, rafting and rock climbing are frequently cited as examples (Wikipedia, 2008).

Adventure tourism occupies a unique place in the tourism paradigm because adventure can mean many things to many people. The following are the characteristics which can be used to measure when a given activity can be classified as an adventure; (1) uncertain outcomes, (2) some elements of danger and risk, (3) challenge, (4) anticipated rewards (5) novelty (6) stimulation and excitement (7) escapism and separation (8) exploration and discovery (9) absorption and focus & (10) contrasting emotions (Swarbrook et al, 2003). Now-a-days with the changes in tastes and
preferences of the international and domestic tourists, the new area of tourism like ecotourism as well as adventure tourism emerged (WTTC/WEFA, 2000).

Adventure travel is associated with specific activities as a primary motive for trips as well as the expected outcomes from the participant's experiences in particular environments (Bhattacharya, 2016). Adventure tourism is one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism market. It has become so popular that approximately 100 million adults have chosen vacations that are classified as soft adventure (Miller, 1997). In the past, the tourism industry has focused on young, wealthy and able-bodied adventure tourists, however, this is slowly changing as marketers become increasingly more aware of the active and adventurous baby boomers (Lehto et al, 2008); (Muller & O'cass, 2001) ;( Patterson 2002).

Unlike other forms of recreation, adventure travel offers a unique opportunity in which participants become more experienced and pursue extended scales of adventures endeavour (Ewert, A & Hollenhorst, S. 1989). Nilachal Hills being a complex of 3 joint hillocks covered by semi-dense to dense vegetation cover, the prospect of adventure tourism is considerably more. During field survey, most of the temples have been found, could be traversed only through a series of winding staircase, amidst dense jungle (Fig. 6.3 and 6.4).

Fig. 6.3: Winding staircase amidst dense jungle in Nilachal Hills
The Hill is also a home to animals like tigers, monkeys, various kinds of snakes, insects of various species. Nature loving and adventure loving people can find great joy in confronting tigers or seeing caves of tiger amidst the hill while traversing to the remote temples and ashrams. This forms the basic characteristics of adventure tourism, i.e., uncertainty, along with some amount of risk and danger, as there is a possibility that those wild animals may even attack people (which has already happened quite a number of times in the Nilachal Hills in the recent past). As reported by local people, tigers have attacked people there leading to serious injuries and even death. One can even enjoy the taste of trekking in the Nilachal Hills. Nature loving people can explore the place as it is full of various spots which offer amazing views of the river Brahmaputra and the city of Guwahati, besides the existence of various herbs and plants of great medicinal values. Moreover, the four winding staircases that has been constructed ages back by the legendary demon king Narakasura also offers scope for adventure tourism (Fig. 6.5 and 6.6). The antiquity of those legendary paths may be understood from the fact that, the stones of which these paths have been constructed has become as smooth as tiles or granite stone due to the use of these paths for traversing uphill and downhill by people through ages. An underlying assumption about adventure tourism is that adventure experience is essentially associated with a psychological state and the participation in physical activities while facing the challenges and risks of a specific environmental setting. Therefore, in adventure travel, the environmental setting
is highly interrelated with the experience of engaging in a particular activity (Hall & Wieler, 1922).

![Image](image1)

**Fig. 6.5**: A part of the stone staircase constructed by the demon king Narakasura

![Image](image2)

**Fig. 6.6**: The Western Gate to The Nilachal Hills (Constructed by Narakasura)

Tourism is one of the most dynamic industries which interacts with the tourists in regular basis and tries to cope up with the changes. Worldwide, the tourists' requirements and preferences are changing. Now-a-days, it has been observed that tourism demands and expectations are changing because of growth of technology, cultural exchange, globalisation impact as well as life-style change. The modern tourists are very much enthusiastic in accepting the challenging destination or the new unexplored places rather than the traditional form of tourism. Now-a-days, tourists does not restrict themselves with sightseeing, relaxation, food and comfort in a tourist
destination. Activities, exploring new things, experimentation as well as the thrill of discovering the inner abilities as well as communication with the nature are becoming important part of tourism (Bhattacharya, 2016). Moreover, another important factor which encourages adventure tourism is people's growing interest in maintaining physical fitness on daily basis. Thus this necessity can also be fulfilled through adventure tourism as it requires, physical capabilities to explore new areas which again helps in maintaining physical fitness. There is a scope of trekking in the undulating elevation of the region too. All these prospects can be seen in Nilachal Hills thus accelerating the prospect of adventure tourism in the region.

6.3 Medical tourism

Medical tourism is not a new concept. It has been in operation without being properly named since a long time. It refers to the travel of people to another country or place for the purpose of obtaining medical treatment in that place. Traditionally, people would travel from less-developed countries to major medical centres in highly developed countries for medical treatment that was unavailable in their own communities (Horowitz, Michael D; Rosensweig, Jeffrey A; Jones Christopher A., 2007). The term medical tourism was initially coined by travel agencies and the media to describe the growing people's trend to travel across borders for health care issues. However, this trend has been gradually changed in the recent times. Now the trend has almost reversed as people from highly developed countries arrives at the third world countries and specially to India to get treatment through various traditional techniques like ayurvedic treatment, yogic therapy, spiritual training, meditation, Unani, aeroma therapy etc. The reason for this shift in trend may be due to various causes, the most profound cause being the cost effectiveness and another being the less use of chemicals and radiations and putting more stress on herbs and herbal products and increasing mental strength through spiritualism.

Christie Reed from the Centre for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) defines medical tourism as a new phenomenon of travellers leaving family and friends to seek care abroad, often in less developed countries, along with the organisations that support incentive for such travel (Reed C.M., 2008). In the present time, more and more people,
especially the Westerners, resorting to Yoga to find cure for chronic health problems and attain peace of mind. Now a days, foreign patients are generally residents of the industrialised countries of the world. The countries to which they travel are typically less developed and have a lower cost of medical care. Moreover, it is becoming a common form of vacationing, sightseeing and refreshment. Hence, medical tourism mixes leisure, fun and relaxation together with witness and health care (Rumaiya, 2015).

The idea of health holiday is to offer the customers an opportunity to get away from this daily routine and come into a different relaxing surrounding. Here, they can enjoy being close to the beach, mountains, natural environment etc. At the same time, they are able to receive an orientation that will help them to improve their life in terms of health and general well being. It is like rejuvenation and clean-up process on all levels - physical, mental, and emotional (World Medical Tourism and Global Health Congress, 2009).

One of the most neglected but having the most potential of medical tourism in Nilachal Hills is the Umachal Ashram along with the Umachal Yogic Hospital and Research Centre situated in the Northern slopes of the Nilachal Hills (Fig. 6.7). Established in 1929 by the Yog Guru Swami Shivananda, the basic concept of establishing this ashram was to treat people having various diseases like diabetes, rheumatism, tuberculosis, ulcer, cancer etc, through physical exercise and Yog Sadhana. Keeping this objective in view, Swami Shivananda set up this 60 bedded Yogic Hospital where people, irrespective of caste, class, background and origin can attain the benefit of the age-old Yogic practices of Indian culture practiced since ages ago by the Rishi Munis of India.

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 6.7 : The Umachal Yogic Hospital and College, Nilachal Hills
Treatment is done free of cost and people can stay in this hospital for months together without spending any money. Voluntary monetary support is however accepted to run the ashram. Located amidst peaceful environment and natural beauty, at the slopes of the Nilachal Hills, it provides an aesthetic environment which not only helps in accelerating the Yogic treatment but also rejuvenates one's mind and soul and provides immeasurable mental peace and sanctity. Right after the setting up of the Yogic Hospital, it attracted many patients all over the world. To expand the knowledge of Yoga and Yogic therapy among people, Swami Shivananda also started a Yogic College naming it as Umachal Yogic Mahavidyalaya and used to give training as Diploma and degree courses of 2 months, 6 months, 1 year and so on. The Yogic hospital even has a separate ward for females for their convenience and attracting females for this treatment.

However, at present times, the age old popularity of Umachal Ashram and Yogic Hospital has diminished due to various related problems like lack of motorable road, lack of finance, lack of advertisement, lack of manpower, lack of Government incentive, lack of maintenance, etc. But at this era where Yoga has attained an international recognition and popularity of various Yog gurus like Baba Ramdev, if favourable conditions are created for its development, Umachal ashram and Yogic Hospital and Research Centre will surely attract lakhs of tourists in the region in the form of medical tourism.

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