Prospects of Tourism in Nilachal Hills: a Geographical Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Nilachal hills, located in the heart of Guwahati city is the home to one of the 51 Shakti Peethas of India, the Mother Goddess Kamakhya. This results in the place to be a centre of attraction within the region and development of tourism. However, there are prospects of further growth of tourism. This paper tries to study the prospects of tourism in the study area. Data and information have been collected mainly from primary surveys following interviews with the local residents tourists and devotees. The findings of the research try to identify further prospects of tourism in the region.

Keywords: Adventure tourism, eco tourism, Religious tourism, Sustainable tourism, Nilachal hill.

I. Introduction:
Apart from these there are numerous other small and big temples within the hills and a number of sacred ponds scattered here and there within the region, blessing the area with an incomparable scenic beauty. The region plays a great role in enriching the culture of the whole of Assam. The main attraction of the region for the tourists has been the Kamakhya temple. People not only from Assam, but also the whole country and people from all over the world knows about this part of India due to this temple. Many myths and legends associated with this temple have increased the importance of the region. People from all over the world come with great expectations to earn the blessings of this Legendary Goddess. The Kamakhya Temple symbolizes the “fusion of faith and practices” of Aryan and Non-Aryan elements in Assam.

The ten Mahavidyas i.e Bhuvaneswari (at maximum height), Bagalamukhi, Chinnamasta, Tara, Kali, Bhairavi, Dhumavati, Tripur Sundari, Matangi and Kamala consist the main temple complex of the Nilachal hills. Among them the three Devi i.e. Tripur Sundari, Kamala and Matangi reside inside the main temple dedicated to Kamakhya. The most important part of the temple is the “Garbhagriha” which is a cave below almost 20 feet from the ground level. The “Garbhagriha” is small, dark and reached by narrow steep stone steps. The sanctum is actually a cave, which consists of no image but a natural spring that flow through a cleft in bedrock, covered all the way with big silver dome on which flower garland, sindur, chunri, sari, Prasad etc. are offered. The sacred water coming through the rock is considered as the most powerful
Jal, which, if taken regularly after having darshan, gives moksh to the bhakt (devotee). Apart from the ten Mahavidya temples there are Shiva temples also named Kotirlinga Mahadev, Kameshwar Mahadev, Siddheshwar Mahadev. There is a very popular saying that no Tantric puja is complete without visiting the Kamakhya temple. Since this is the most powerful Tantric peetha, animal sacrifice is a must for getting Tantric Siddhis. Animals include male small goats, buffalo, pigeon etc. Thus, for all these features, the temple and the whole of the region attracts lakhs and lakhs of tantric and Shakta devotees in an annual festival celebrated in the Nilachal hills known as the Ambubachi Mela, celebrated every year in the month of June. This results in the gradual expansion of tourism sector in the region. However, there are prospects of different forms of tourism in the region and it is this prospect that is tried to study in this research paper. For this, data have been collected from primary sources through direct interview with tourists and devotees, local people and people relating to the maintenance of the temple complex during more than 3 years of fieldwork conducted between 2010 to 2013.

II. Objectives of the Study: The objectives in this paper is -
1. To know about Nilachal hill
2. To study the prospects of tourism in the study area

III. Area of Study:

The Nilachal Hills is located in the heart of Guwahati, the city known as “the Gateway of North –East India”. The Nilachal Hills is an abode to one of the main centre of Tantric Hinduism and Shakti Peetha, Mother Goddess Kamakhya along with the Dasamahavidyas (i.e. other forms of the goddess along with their Bhairaba’s).

![Location Map of the Nilachal Hill](image_url)

Fig. 1 The study area, The Nilachal Hills, Guwahati, Assam
IV. Methodology:

To fulfill the objectives, both primary and secondary data were collected. Data and information have been collected mainly from primary surveys following interviews with the local residents tourists and devotees. The findings of the research try to identify further prospects of tourism in the region.

V. Result and Discussion:

Today tourism is perceived as a contributor for peace and development, image building, mixing people and culture, development of international relations, infrastructure development, achieving sustainable patterns of environmental up-gradation, upliftment of the society and global integration[1]. Tourism society of England defines Tourism as the temporary short term movement of people to destination outside the places where they normally live and work and their activities during the stay at each destination. It also includes services like accommodation, restaurant establishments, cafes, bars and canteens as well as travel agencies and tour operators [2]. The particular significance of tourism industry in India is its contribution to national integration and preservation of natural as well as cultural environments and enrichment of the social and cultural lives of people like preservation of monuments and heritage properties. This sector is also helping the traditional art forms, crafts and culture[3].

Tourism is unique. It involves industry without smoke, education without classroom, integration without legislation and diplomacy without formality[4]. Tourism is not an industry, it is better to call it an activity. It is an activity that takes place when people move to some
other place for leisure or for business and stay at least for 24 hours[5]. Tourism is a travel for recreational, leisure or business purposes. The World Tourism Organization defines tourists as people who “travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for more than 24 hours and not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within places visited”.

Tourism is the largest peacetime movement of people in the history of mankind. Millions of people, internationally and domestically, travel each year, and this makes tourism one of the largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world.[6] Tourism is one of the most vibrant, growing and economically useful activities in the world having wide social and cultural ramifications. Since the end of the second world war, tourism has grown to one of the world’s largest and fastest growing economic sectors in the world[7].

The prospects of tourism in Nilachal hill can be categorise as below

**A) Religious Tourism:-**

Religious tourism usually involves followers of particular faiths visiting locations that some people regard as holy sites. In many instances, religious tourists journey to these sites on the anniversaries of events that are of importance to followers of specific religions. Traditionally, those involved in religious tourism were referred to as pilgrims but in modern times that term is not as widely used since many non-religious individuals also embark on trips to holy sites because many of these sites are of cultural or historical as well as religious interest.

Religious communities located throughout the world sometimes arrange trips to holy sites. These groups often organize events to raise funds to cover the cost of the trip so that members who lack the means to cover their own costs are able to go on the trip. In some instances, religious groups contact other members of the faith who live close to the holy sites and arrange for travelers to stay in monasteries or other properties that are operated by members of the religious faith.

While religious tourism often takes the form of lengthy group trips, in other instances it can take the form of a day trip or a brief visit to a holy site. Therefore religious tourism can involve both formal travel arrangements and impromptu trips to nearby sites.

Assam is an ancient land known for astrological and Tantric studies. It has many old pilgrim places of great significance, one of the most important being the Mother Goddess Kamakhya Temple situated in the Nilachal Hills. Apart from that, the Mother Goddess has also taken the form of Dasamahavidyas within the hillock being accompanied by their respective Bhairavas. This has transformed the region to be religious gateway to North East India. There are many legends associated with these temples which are depicted in the ancient religious scripts like the Yogini Tantra, Kalika Purana etc. which makes the sites to be of cultural,
historical as well as of religious importance. People from all over the state, all over the country and in fact all over the world visits these temples with utmost devotion. During our field survey from 2010 to 2013 we have also seen some people came from various places by arranging groups and sometimes even being funded by the local government for visiting such a place of religious importance. Generally such groups of people arrives this place during the Ambubachi Mela being celebrated annually in the month of June. Besides that there is seen a continuous flow of devotees daily in the region sometimes for a day or for a few hours. Among the interviews that have been conducted in relation to this research purpose, almost 90% of the interviewed tourists are found to visit the region for religious faith and belief. All these features present in the region are a clear indication of existence of religious tourism in the Nilachal Hills and also the growing number of devotees each year to this region shows the future prospect of Religious tourism in the region.

B) Adventure Tourism:

Adventure tourism is a type of niche tourism involving exploration or travel to remote areas, where the traveler should expect the unexpected. Adventure tourism is rapidly growing in popularity as tourists seek unusual holidays, different from the typical beach vacation. Normally it includes within its ambit the travel and activities like mountaineering, trekking etc. but in a broader sense it includes exploration.

The Nilachal hills being situated near the mighty river Brahmaputra and being an association of 3 hillocks, it consists of a rich natural resources and scenic beauty. Thus, there is great scope of exploring the beauties being bestowed by Mother Nature. The region can be accessed by road from the foothill to the top in the modern times. However, there are other three ways which have been used from the ancient times by devotees and local residents. One is from Kalipur Bus stop (of present time), a way constructed by cutting stone staircases, moving through the Kalipur Ashram, Bijoy Krishna Sadhan Ashram and Umachal Ashram to the top of the hill i.e. the Bhubaneswari Temple (Fig. 3) Another way by which the region was accesses by people in the ancient times and also used in the present time is the stone staircase from the foothills starting from Pandu (The temple Mahakal Ganesh being located at the foothills)upto the Kamakhya temple. (Fig. 4.) It is said that this stone staircase haas been constructed by the demon king Narakasura within one night o impress the Goddess Kamakhya, to marry her, according to legends. These two paths when accessed can be as adventurous as any mountaineering or trekking activity to common people, the path being surrounded by jungle and many small temples on the way to the Kamakhya temple. Moreover , these paths traverses through great scenic beauty with many small and big temples on the way, like the Mahakaal Ganesh temple in the Foothills, the Shamshaan Kali temple in the middle part of the hill (in the way from Pandu to Foothills), and in the other path i.e from the Kalipur Bus stop to the hilltop , which is locally known as the Mekhela Ujua path, one can come across the Umachal Temple, the Bandurga temple, the Bagala Temple, the Bhubaneshwari temple etc.
Another Kutchcha staircase which goes up to the hilltop is located near the stone staircase at Pandu.

Fig. 3 Stone Staircase from Kalipur Bus Stop to the Top of the Hill
Fig. 4. Staircase way from Pandu up to The Kamakhya Temple

Thus, these features of the region can attract more and more tourists for adventure tourism from all over the world for exploration of the scenic and natural beauty of the region, if not from religious point of view. It will be an important prospect to attract the attention of people from abroad, having different religious faiths and beliefs.

C) Ecotourism:

Ecotourism is a form of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as low-impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial (mass) tourism. Its purpose may be to educate the traveler, to provide funds for ecological conservation, to directly benefit the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, or to foster respect for different cultures and for human rights. Generally, ecotourism deals with natural environments. Ecotourism focuses on socially responsible travel, personal growth, and environmentally sustainability. Ecotourism typically involves travel to destinations where flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Ecotourism is intended to offer tourists insight into the impact of human beings on the environment, and to foster a greater appreciation of our natural habitats. Many scholars 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 favourable to the environment", which is, on a practical level, variously interpreted according to the country.

In the absence of a clear and recognized definition, the definition for the International Society for Eco-Tourism (1991) is: "... a responsible tourism in natural environment which preserves it and participates to the well-being of local populations".

The Nilachal Hills being a hill comprising of three hillocks, locally called the Brahma Pahar, Vishnu Pahar and Siva Pahar, provides great scenic beauty, being covered by rich natural resources, flora and fauna, beautiful small and big water bodies in the form of lakes (locally called Kundas) being attached to the innumerable small and big temples scattered within the hills, most important being the temple of Mother Goddess Kamakhya. These temples are not only of religious importance but also of archaeological importance, some of the temples being constructed centuries ago. The growing number of tourists in the region resulting in the exploration of the region, has directly or indirectly affected the environment of the region, with growing number of vehicles. However, the common bus services plying from the foothills to the hilltop, which can accommodate large number of passengers at an affordable cost, plus the presence of taxi services has resulted in the discouraging of lesser number of private vehicles, which could otherwise have accelerated the vehicular pollution in the region. This in turn, has given employment to a large section of the local unemployed youth, engulfing them in the tourism net besides saving the natural environment to some extent. The growing number of tourists in the region has accelerated the economy of the region resulting into the establishments of both temporary and permanent shops, lodges etc., thus including the local community within the ambit of tourism. Not only this, some educated and unemployed youths are also contributing in the tourism sector by serving in various posts in the temples, from priests to management personnel, to cleaners. Even the women folk of the region are seen to be contributing in the management of the temples, engaged in various small and big stalls selling puja samagris, puja thalis, flowers and various other offerings to the Goddesses and various religious items etc. These growing economic and developmental activities attracts tourists in return, thus it can be said that there is a very active participation of the local people in the tourism sector of this region. All these are a clear indication of the existence and growing prospects of ecotourism in the region.

D) Cultural Tourism:

Cultural tourism has been defined as 'the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs.'

Cultural tourism is a subset of tourism concerned with a country with a country or region's culture, specifically the lifestyle of the people in those geographic areas, the history of
those people, their art, architecture, religions and other elements that helped shape their way of life.

McIntosh and Goeldner (1986) consider cultural tourism as comprising "all aspects of travel whereby travellers learn about their contemporary ways of life or thought". In other words, cultural tourists are motivated to learn about the products and processes of other cultures. The wide definition of cultural tourism adopted by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) includes "all movements of persons, .......... because they satisfy the human need for diversity, tending to raise the cultural level of the individual and giving rise to new knowledge, experience and encounters."

The Nilachal Hills being a home to a number of numerous big and small temples and being resided by the priestly class and various Sevaits serving in those temples, is a home to a rich and variety of cultural conglomeration. Apart from the Ambubashi mela being celebrated in the region every year, which attracts lakhs of devotees from all around the country and the world, there are also some other remarkable events that are being celebrated in the region like the Manasha Puja, the Kumari Puja etc. with great enthusiasm. The region being resided by people of various class, it bears an amalgamation of rich culture.

Thus, there is a great scope to attract tourists and to let them explore the rich cultural heritage of the region.

E) Sustainable Tourism:

The concept of Sustainable tourism and Ecotourism almost go hand in hand. Sustainable tourism is envisaged as "leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems" (World Tourism Organisation).

Sustainable tourism can be seen as having regard to ecological and socio-cultural carrying capacities and includes involving the community of the destination in tourism development planning. It also involves integrating tourism to match current economic growth policies so as to mitigate some of the negative economic and social impacts of "mass tourism".

This type of tourism is expected to be developed in every part of the world. It is not expected that tourism industry grow at the cost of environmental pollution, degradation, loss of human habitat, instability in local communities survival, disintegrity in cultural values of the region. It has been observed that in the Nilachal Hills, the local management board, viz. the Kamakhya Debottar Board has kept a keen eye on the overall maintenance of the temples in the region. Government has taken steps in the beautification of the area, along with making it easily accessible to the tourists. Various view points, resting shades has been made in the entire region for the tourists to enjoy the natural beauty of the region. Tourists lodge (Prashanti) has been constructed in the region to accommodate a number of tourists. Apart from that, workers
and cleaners have been appointed by the management board to maintain the cleanliness of the region. Moreover, voluntary organisations like NCC, Scouts & Guides also offer their selfless support during the festival times, to maintain the crowd of tourists and overall management of the region.

VI. Conclusion:

Tourism has always been considered as a single entity. However, with the growing age of specializations it has become very essential to draw out clear demarcations among the various forms and types because that may help in proper emphasizing and proper attention to all the micro aspects which otherwise remain unheeded. Normally, Nilachal Hills being a home to a number of temples, it is always expected that people will come here only for religious purposes, but after doing a detailed field study and interviewing a number of tourists at different time of a year, it is found that there is a scope for other forms of tourism like adventure tourism and may even be suitable for recreational tourism apart from religious tourism. This will help to attract more and more foreign tourists that will again help to earn revenue to the government. The other forms of tourism will also help to attract people of different religious faiths and beliefs. However, for this purpose, the local people needs to be educated and they will have to broaden up their minds so as to embrace people from other caste, communities and religion with affection and offer full cooperation to them. Government initiatives and voluntary participation of the local people can go a long way promoting the various types of tourism. However, proper advertisement of the various specialities of the region is needed along with improved accessibility, hygiene and sanitation etc. that can attract the attention of people worldwide. All these can go a long way in establishing and developing various forms of tourism in the Nilachal Hills.

References:


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