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**RURAL TOURISM IN ASSAM: SATISFACTION OF FOREIGN AND
THE DOMESTIC TOURISTS**

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ABSTRACT:

The scope of rural tourism at the national level is really high as 70 per cent of India's population lives over seven million of its villages. These villages are unique in the sense that they still preserve the traditional heritage not found elsewhere in the world. But India's share in the world tourism market is less than one per cent. As far as the state of Assam is concerned, the scenario is still discouraging in spite of its huge potentials in the field of rural tourism. Assam is a state of India which is the pioneer in respect of tourism among North Eastern states. The state is endowed with many basic resources, unique natural beauty, different species of wild-life, religious places, historical sites, attractive rural cultural heritage and hospitable rural people for which the state can rightly be designated as paradise state. Thus the state has vast potentials to develop the rural tourism sector for the development of rural people and places. The present article has been designed to examine the Attitudes of the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists towards Rural Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Tourism has been an important human activity since time immemorial. The urge to explore new people and places within and outside one's own country has kept enthusiastic people always mobile. Subsequently, the tourism as a source of economy has gradually been gaining prominence worldwide and now is one of the world's most rapidly growing industries.

Since tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world, it has become a major source of revenue for many nations. According to a recent study, "world tourism generated 15 per cent of the world's GNP and the domestic tourism is assumed to be 9 per cent greater than the international tourism. It is forecasted that by 2020, the tourism industry would be the single biggest industry in the world" (Devi, 2009)

In India the tourism industry holds special position as it has not only the potentiality to grow at a high rate, but also stimulate other economic sectors through its backward and forward linkages and cross-sectional synergies with other sectors. It can provide impetus to other industry in the country and generate enough wealth to help pay off the international debt. The tourism sector can contribute significantly to national integration as well as preservation of natural and cultural environment; create substantial job opportunities particularly for unskilled and semi-skilled workers as well to alleviate the poverty of the country. It has been stated that tourism is the largest service industry in India with a contribution of 8.78 per cent to the total employment and generating about US \$150 billion in 2010 which is expected to increase to US\$ 350.5 billion by 2020 at a 9.4 per cent annual growth rate (www.wikipedia).

2. RURAL TOURISM:

As stated by Ratz and Paczko (1998), rural tourism is that kind of tourism which takes place in the countryside. Gannon (1994) defines it as a range of activities, services and amenities provided by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to their areas in order to generate extra income for their business. Lane (1994) attempts to clarify the concept and says that rural tourism is a tourism located in the rural areas i.e., the areas which are rural in scale, character and function reflecting the unique patterns of the rural environment, economy, history and location. In that sense, rural tourism is a tool which can increase the capacity of rural communities to control their rural milieu in a more gainful way. These three definitions reflect many intrinsic characteristics of rural tourism. The intrinsic qualities of the rural tourism include a sense of space, peace and tranquility and an escape from the stress of modern pressures (Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997).

2.1 Study Area:

Golaghat is a district in Assam, India with a glorious history. The very name 'Golaghat' probably appeared in early 19th century, when businessman of Rajasthani origin started coming to this 'DoyangSahar', the name of the place at that time. The Dhansiri, an important tributary of the river Brahmaputra has been flowing on its western part. The businessman had a long journey along this river and got off from their boats in a 'Ghat', i.e., a harbour. They started a 'Bazar' i.e 'Gola' in this ghat and so the name of the ghat became popular as Golaghat. Legends still persist regarding the origin of Golaghat but the one narrated above is generally acceptable to all. The district Golaghat is located between 25°48'00" to 26°48'00" N latitudes and 93°07'00" to 94°11'30" E longitudes. It covers an area of 3502 sq. km. out of which 3470.48 sq. km. are rural (around 99 per cent) and 31.52 sq. km. are urban (below 1 per cent) with a total population of 1066888 persons as per census 2011. Among these 969152 persons or 90.84 per cent are rural and 97736 or 9.16 per cent are urban. It was recognized as the district in 23rd October 1987. The district is bounded by Kakodonga River and Jorhat district in the east, Nagaon and KarbiAnglong district in the west, Nagaland in the south and the mighty river Brahmaputra in the north. The physiography of the district is constituted by a variety of features such as flood plain, beels and swamps, forest land, occasional highland and foothills of the Karbi plateau etc.

2. DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY:

The present work is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data is collected from different books, reports, recommendations and publications of the government and non-government agencies including the publications of the tourism department. Some other general information has been collected from different websites.

For primary data, The structured schedule prepared for collecting data from the 76 rural communities of the selected potential tourism sites have incorporated a number of socio-demographic questions and the interview was conducted by approaching the heads or any other representatives of the randomly selected households from these sites.

Altogether 200 respondents have been interviewed from these four sites and their perceptual variations against the backdrop of age, sex, literacy standard, occupation, etc. are examined by using certain basic statistical techniques.

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION:

4.1 Attitudes of the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists towards Rural Tourism:

A rural landscape tourism involves a wide variety of activities including natural or manmade attractions and other related facilities. It has numerous offshoots related to ecotourism, green tourism and natural tourism. Rural tourism enterprises are typically smaller and newer than other types of rural economy. They are situated in rural areas with a low level of capital and low levels of tourism. It is also a tool that improves rural communities' ability to handle their rural environment more profitably. A significant topic which was addressed in the following discussions was what tourists think about rural tourism.

- **Rural Tourism Experiences:**

How do the foreign tourists feel in visiting rural areas of Golaghat district as well as Assam is of special interest for the geographers. Because, the future growth of rural tourism in the state will depend on the perception and impression of these tourists. As such, an attempt was also made to evaluate the experience of the tourists on rural landscape. It has been observed that (Table 1) as many as 80 per cent of the foreign tourist remarked categorically that they had experience on rural tourism in other parts of the world, but the experience they gathered in Golaghat as well as Assam is quite unique and this kind of perceptual reflection may provide base for further growth of this sector in future. On the other hand 20 per cent of them had not earned any experience on rural tourism not even in Assam as well as the study area.

Table 1: Experienced of the tourists on rural tourism in Assam

Sl. No	Experience on Rural Tourism	No. of tourists		% of tourist	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Nice experience in Assam	80	63	80	63
2	No experience on rural tourism	20	37	20	37
		100	100	100	100
	Total				

The data in the Table 1 shows that out of 100 per cent domestic tourists, 63 per cent remarks that they had nice experience in different forms of rural tourism in any part of India as well as Assam which focus the rural life and culture. On the other hand 33 per cent of the domestic tourists do not have any experience about rural tourism at present.

Moreover, it has also been observed that many of the tourists had different forms tourism experience and they have already utilized their vacations for the following forms of tourisms. Travel experience varies according to the varieties of human kinds and geographical distribution. The study of the experience of the tourist simply helps to identify their expectations. It indicates that tourists are normally attracted towards the enjoyment of nature and wildlife and some of them look for experiencing heritage and culture. The data shows that (Table 2) about 47.78 per cent foreign tourist enjoy the nature and wildlife of Golaghat district, 33.99 per cent have experienced heritage and culture of rural areas of Assam as well

as Golaghat district and 18.22 per cent of the foreign tourists earn experience and enjoy the folk tradition of the rural Assam. Thus the tourists visiting Golaghat district get opportunity to witness all forms of tourism and as such the comments passed by them on Assam as well as Golaghat district are always positive except certain infrastructural limitations.

Table 2: Experience of the tourists during Vacation

Sl. No	Experience during Vacation	No. of tourists		% of tourist	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Enjoy Nature and Wildlife	97*	94*	47.78	47
2	Experience Heritage/Culture	69*	72*	33.99	36
3	Tradition	37*	34*	18.22	17
4	Others	00	00	00.00	00
	Total			100	100

The Table 2 clearly shows that out of 100 per cent of the domestic tourists, 47 per cent enjoy the nature and wildlife of Assam as well as the Golaghat district, 36 per cent have experienced heritage and culture of rural areas of the study area and 17 per cent of tourist experienced the traditions of rural areas of Assam as well as the Golaghat district.

- **Lodging Preference in Rural Assam:**

The actual practice of lodging situation of the tourists has already been presented in previous analysis. Accommodation facilities are the places where tourists stop being travelers and become guests and it is the place where the tourists spend most of their money and time. Thus the level of guest satisfaction achieved by the accommodation facilities will in large measure determine the total success of the tourism programmed.

Table 3: Lodging preference in Rural Assam by the tourists

Sl.No	Lodging Situation	No. of tourists		% of tourists	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Rural Lodge	76*	57*	64.95	41.30
2	Others(Dak Bungalow, Inspection Bungalow)	20*	00	17.09	00.00
3	Community Lodge	11*	46*	09.40	33.34
4	Home Stay	10*	00	08.54	09.42
5	Hotel	00	22*	00.00	15.97
	Total			100	100

In case of rural tourism in Assam as well as Golaghat district the Table 3 reveals that many of the foreign tourists, i.e., around 64.95 per cent prefer rural lodges when they travel rural Assam, 8.54 per cent prefer Home Stay situation, 9.40 per cent in community lodge and 17.09 per cent prefer dak bungalow and other inspection bungalow located in rural areas of Assam.

Again the Table 3 also reveals that 41.30 per cent of the domestic tourist prefer rural lodge and 33.34 per cent prefer community lodge as the lodging place when they travel in rural Assam as well as Golaghat district. The 9.42 per cent and 15.97 per cent of the domestic tourists prefer home stay and hotels respectively as their preferable lodging situation. But it is important to mention here that the rural Assam as well as Golaghat districts does not have such type of lodging situation. There is thus a scope of development of rural accommodation.

- **Village-Family Visit by the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists:**

Rural tourism focuses on participating in a rural lifestyle. It is true that for many tourists, both villages as well as households are great sources of attraction. This allows the rural masses in creating an alternative source of income outside the agricultural sector and hence it is an important component of the study.

Table 4: Tourists visited the villages of Golaghat district

SL. No	Comment (Visit Villages of Assam)	No. of tourists		% of tourists	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Yes	60	46	60	46
2	No	40	54	40	54
	Total	100	100	100	100

A study of the rate of visiting villages of Assam as well as Golaghat district by foreign tourists (Table 4) reveals that 60 per cent of them have visited the nearest villages of Kaziranga and Majuli of Golaghat and Jorhat district of Assam. Another 40 per cent foreign tourist cannot visit the villages of Assam during their tour. They were interested but due to the lack of the exposure and ignorance about the unique features villages and villagers of Assam as well as Golaghat district, they failed to do so and hence the proper publicity seems to be an important dimension.

The collected information shows that 46 per cent of the domestic tourists (Table 4) visited some villages as well as households located near the Kaziranga National Park. Although the sizable proportion of domestic tourists (54 %) did not visit the villages, this is, as stated by them, not because of the lack of interest but due to the lack of the proper exposures of the villagers and their traditions and cultures. This indicates that this particular sector of tourism has immense scope of enlargement and proper publicity can make the area more tourists centric.

- **Main attraction of the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists in Rural Assam:**

Attractions are the main motivators for travel. It frequently receives the smallest portion of the tourist's expenditure. The list of attraction is extensive and in many cases, it is a combination of attraction that brings the tourist to a destination area.

Table 5: Main attraction of the tourist's in rural Assam

S.L. No	Main attraction of rural Assam	No. of tourists		% of tourists	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Hospitality	47*	58*	33.81	33.72
2	Culture Settings	41*	51*	29.49	29.65
3	Environment	37*	43*	26.61	25.00
4	Settings	10*	14*	07.19	08.13
5	Festivals	04*	06*	02.87	03.48
	Total			100	100

In the rural tourism context, hospitality, natural setting, environment, culture and festivals are the main attraction and they play an important role in determining the competitiveness of the destination. An observation in this regards (Table 5) in context of Assam as a whole indicates that 33.81 per cent and 29.49 per cent of foreign tourist remarks that the main attraction of the visit rural areas and villages of Assam is the Hospitality of the rural people of Assam and the native culture of the rural people. Environment of the rural areas of Assam attract 26.61

per cent of the foreign tourist. Another 7.19 per cent and 2.87 per cent of foreign tourist come to rural Assam due to the attraction of Natural settings and to observe and enjoy the folk festivals of rural Assam.

It is observed (Table 5) that 33.72 per cent of the domestic tourist get attracted towards the hospitality of the rural people and 29.65 per cent remark that rural life and culture is the main attraction. On the other hand, 25 per cent of the domestic tourist remarks that rural environment is the main source of attraction while another 8.31 per cent visited rural Assam due to its natural settings. A smaller proportion of them (3.48 %) were interested on folk festivals which were observed in different rural areas of Assam.

- **Comments of the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists on Rural Assam:**

Evaluation of tourist comments on rural areas is an urgent need to identify the strength and weakness of the area and to re-orient the development strategy for future. In this context an attempt is made to understand the comments of the foreign tourist about rural Assam. In this regards (Table 6) 73 per cent of the foreign tourist remarks that rural areas of Assam focus the real Assam. On the other hand 27 per cent remarks that they don't know whether it is possible or not. No negative remarks have been come from foreigner side.

Table 6: Tourist's comments on rural Assam

S.L. No	Remarks	No. of tourists		% of tourists	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Yes	73	83	73	83
2	No	00	00	00	00
3	Don't know	27	17	27	17
	Total	100	100	100	100

Out of 100 per cent domestic tourist (Table 6), 83 per cent opined that rural area of Assam is really successful in focusing the real Assam. On the other hand 17 per cent of the domestic tourists did not give any comment whether it is true or not, but none of them provided any negative comments about the rural life of Assam.

- **Comments of the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists on Economic Aspects:**

Employment is an important effect of tourism. The tourism industry is highly labour intensive service industry and hence is a valuable source of employment. Tourism creates a multitude of employment opportunity in formal and non formal sector. In this regards (Table 8) 100 per cent of foreign tourist who visit Golaghat district of Assam remarks that tourism can generate employment opportunity and it increase the income level of the people of Assam. They also observed that in the district, there are immense potentials of rural tourism and this is expected to be utilized by the state.

Table 7: Tourist's comments on tourism generate employment opportunity and increase income

S.L.No	Comments	No. of tourists		% of tourists	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Yes	100	100	100	100
2	No	00	00	00	00
	Total	100	100	100	100

In context of domestic tourists perception (Table 7) 100 per cent put forward their positive comments stating that tourism can generate employment and income opportunities and the

people of Assam can derive benefits from tourism at a greater scale as the state is full with immense potentials.

- **Comments of the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists on Environment friendly Tourism:**

The environment is the core of tourism product. Tourism has the power to enhance the environment, to preserve culture and history to set sustainable use limits and maintain natural attraction. Tourism has also the power to destroy the environment. Preservation and protection of the environment and natural attraction is dependent on the nature and behaviour of tourists. Today's world has almost been endangered by polluting environment and as such a clean and healthy environment is becoming a rare commodity. All tourists of the world are looking for a congenial environment for their tours and travel as they are now aware of the potential health hazards caused by the polluted environment. Comments of the tourists visiting the study area have confirmed this fact. The study shows that almost a significant proportion of foreign tourists look for a good physical environment and a unique atmosphere of stay in any destination. To them, what are being expected in Assam has almost been fulfilled. Assam is a place where the gap between the expectation and reality for the tourists is not wide. The data shows (Table 8) 92 per cent of foreign tourists have remarked that when they planned for a trip they considered and selected an environmental friendly situation and this has been found by them in Assam as well as Golaghat district as desired. Only 2 per cent remarked it as against expectation and another 6 per cent provided no comment on it.

Table 8: Comments of the tourists on Environment friendly tourism

S.L. No	Comments	No. of tourists		% of tourists	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Visit only environment-friendly areas	92	63	92	63
2	No comment	02	04	02	04

The collected data (Table 9) clearly reveals that 63 per cent of the domestic tourists stated that the environment in which they are planning to visit must be environmental friendly and free from any kind of negativity. They belong to the group of environment-friendly tourists. Remaining 33 per cent are also looking for similar situation, but they still want to visit such areas which are environmentally not attractive taking the areas of this kind as a source of adventure. Only 4 per cent of the domestic tourists have offered no comments on this aspect.

- **Foreign and Domestic Tourist's Objective of Touring Golaghat district of Assam:**

Human activity is related to recreation and tourism is a function of an individual or group's willingness or desire to engage in such pursuits. A better understanding of the objective of touring Golaghat district is necessary for the development of future strategy of tourism in Golaghat district as well as Assam.

Table 9: Objective of touring the Golaghat District of Assam by the tourists

S.L. No.	Objective of Touring	No. of tourists		% of tourist	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	To Study the Natural Flora and Fauna	79*	87*	59.84	56.12
2	To learn about the culture of the district	25*	39*	18.93	25.16
3	To Explore new adventures and places	18*	19*	13.63	12.25
4	To Relax and Rejuvenation	08*	04*	06.06	02.58

5	To spend quality times with friends and relatives	02*	06*	01.51	03.87
	Total			100	100

In regard to the objectives, it is found that in the collected data in Table 9, 59.84 per cent of foreign tourist toured in the Golaghat district to study natural flora and fauna of the district, 18.93 per cent came to learn about the culture of the district, 13.63 per cent interested to explore new adventure and new places, 6.06 per cent and 1.51 per cent toured with a view to relax and rejuvenation of their health and mind and to spend times with friends and their relative.

From the assessment, it has come to the focus that as many as 56.12 per cent of the domestic tourists visited the Golaghat district of Assam for studying the flora and fauna, 25.16 per cent for learning the culture of the diverse people, 12.25 per cent visited taking the tourism as an adventure to their lives. Only a small fraction, i.e., 3.87 per cent and 2.58 per cent of the domestic tourists' were visited the district for relaxation and rejuvenation of the health and mind by spending time with their friends and relatives. It is therefore apparent that the main objectives of domestic tourists for touring this district of Assam are related to the acquisition of knowledge and enjoyment.

- **Satisfaction Level of the Foreign and the Domestic Tourists on Rural Tourism:**

Although it is not easier to measure the level of satisfaction of tourists, yet an attempt was to know their reactions about their experience on rural landscape of Golaghat district as well as Assam. Based on certain components given in Table 10, their feelings have been asked and accordingly a generalized picture has been obtained. The study in this regards reveals that 33.50 per cent of foreign tourist expressed satisfaction on existing physical environment which has still been away from severe degradation. To them there exists a balanced man-environment relation without having any negative impact on nature. Another 26.17 per cent of the foreign tourist satisfied the Hassle free travel in Assam, 20.94 per cent of the foreign tourist remarks that the satisfaction touring of rural Golaghat district as well as Assam is based on Hygienic condition of living. They see, observe and enjoy the rural situation of Assam and Golaghat district, 10.47 per cent of tourists expressed satisfaction on security status of rural Assam and Golaghat district. 6.28 per cent and 4.47 per cent of foreign tourist satisfied on price and privacy when they travel rural areas of Golaghat district as well as Assam.

Table 10: Satisfaction level of the tourists on rural tourism in Golaghat district as well as Assam

Sl. No	Satisfaction based	No. of tourists		% of tourists	
		Foreign	Domestic	Foreign	Domestic
1	Man-environment relation	64*	71*	33.50	30.47
2	Hassle free travel	50*	46*	26.17	19.74
3	Hygiene	40*	43*	20.94	18.45
4	Security	20*	18*	10.47	07.72
5	Price	12*	39*	06.28	16.73
6	Privacy	09*	16*	04.47	06.86
	Total			100	100

Based on the survey of the domestic tourist, it has been observed that (Table 11) 30.47 per cent of the domestic tourist expressed their satisfaction over the man and environment and their pattern of relationship in the study area, 19.47 per cent were highly satisfied on the

hassle free travel in the area, 18.49 per cent expressed their satisfaction over the health and hygiene condition of the rural areas.

Some of the tourists, the share being 16.73 per cent, 7.72 per cent and 6.86 per cent were found to be highly satisfied with price, security and privacy of the Golaghat district as well as Assam.

5. FINDINGS & CONCLUSION:

From the study it is found that most of the tourists both foreign and domestic which are visited Assam their perception is almost same in context of rural tourism. They are most interested to visit the natural feature than the cultural features of the area. The level of satisfaction of tourist depends on the relationship between tourists, localities and various facilities provided to them at the destination. The study reveals that the satisfaction base of foreign tourist (33.50%) in the context of the rural tourism experience is mainly based on positive man-environment relationship on the locality and hassle free travel (26.17%) within the area. It also observed that the factors of man-environment relationship are excellent which means most of the tourists enjoy the man-environment relationship. Again the tourists were happy about the hassle free travel and also hygienic condition of the rural Assam. Some tourists are not happy with price, security and privacy. The perceptions of domestic tourists are also similar to that of foreign tourist. It is interesting to note that the rural attributes including the culture, traditions and even the simplistic nature of the rural masses have been incorporated as a source of pleasure by both the foreign and domestic tourists and this signifies the rural tourism as an emerging field in the world tourism map.

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