



## Economic Development through Collaborative Tourism Marketing In a State Controlled Peripheral Destination of Tripura

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the struggles of State controlled tourism destinations in the peripheral areas. Governmental management of tourism makes it harder for destinations to be market oriented. Despite having a host of scintillating attractions across its territory, the State of Tripura in India is yet to come up on the international or even national tourism map. This study draws from literature and secondary data to understand destination marketing issues in Tripura and offers insights that could be generalized to similar destinations. It is observed that, the lethargy created by governmental agencies created an opportunity for nongovernmental agencies to pitch in and become change agents. A blessing in disguise here is that this has helped to create various sustainable, community oriented, social tourism ventures.

**Keywords: Economic development, Destination marketing, Tourism**

### Introduction

A tourist destination can be defined as a geographical area which includes all the necessary services for tourists including accommodation, hospitality, entertainment and activities. The whole destination provides the experience and individual players act interdependently to provide tourist the requisite product on which they compete with other destinations (Ermen and Gnoth, 2020). Leiper (2004) highlighted the temporal experience of destinations while Ritchie and Crouch (2010) described destination as the most fundamental element to tourism. Ashworth and Voogd (1990) made a clear distinction between geographic (destination) marketing to place (destination) marketing, thus giving rise to the concept of destination branding. World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2002), in its attempts to quantify tourism flows, focused more on the tangible elements of a destination. It incorporates physical and administrative boundaries defining its management, images, perceptions, market competitiveness. Manente and Mingheti, (2019) described destinations in terms of stakeholder-actors and their interrelatedness.

The promotion and marketing of destination are typically managed by a central firm, a conglomerate, known as Destination Marketing Organization (DMO). Malhotra (1996) reported that destination marketing research is generally concerned with the application of theories and techniques to identify and contribute towards solving marketing management decisions. There has been a general shift in the past 43 years from DMOs as government departments, and Regional Tourism Organizations (RTOs) as private sector promotional cooperatives, to public-private partnerships (PPPs) which essentially involve private sector board members (Pike, 2008) and the Quasi-Government Bodies (QUANGO) where they are funded by government but not directly run as part of a government (Pike and Page, 2014). In this regard, Fyall (2011) highlighted the need for strong coordination – ideally, element of the organization should be closely coupled and owned by the same agency. Irrespective of debates concerning the role played by DMOs over the years, the DMOs operating in the North East States" (NESs) are essentially government bodies performing its role in infrastructure development and marketing of tourism products.

The focus of DMO activities lies in developing and leading collaborative marketing communication strategies that match internal (destination) resources with macro environment



(market) opportunities (Pike and Page, 2014). Chen and Paulraj (2004) argued that if the organizations operating within destinations wish to succeed in achieving their objectives, they must reorient their organizational strategies toward the achievement of “collaborative advantage” rather than “competitive advantage”. This brings to fore questions regarding how and how well components collaborate in the destination. In fact, design and implementation of DMO strategies require collaboration in every phase. In the light of aforementioned discussion, this paper attempts to throw light upon the prospect of collaborative framework for destination marketing of tourism products of the State and the consequent need for joint action to resolve issues for overall growth of tourism amongst the NESs. This study draws on published reports in newspapers and journals, annual and study reports of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India along with Department of Tourism, Government of Tripura as well as other print and internet publications relating to this field of study. It also involved spot visits to popular tourist spots inside the state. The destination level information was collected directly from the state government officials entrusted with the task. Domestic and foreign tourist survey conducted by National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi for Tripura during 2009-10 commissioned by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India was taken as base for analysis in the study. The information derived from sources were processed and analyzed as per the need of the study. As the study primarily depended upon secondary sources of information, the results arrived at has a direct bearing from the source from which it was collected. The basic objective of the paper is to elucidate the premises of collaborative destination marketing of tourism products in Tripura. In particular, the current study aims to:

- To make an overview of tourism sector in Tripura;
- To make an inventory of South Asian Economic Initiatives and its role for Tripura;
- To make an assessment for issues of collaborative framework for tourism promotion in the state; and
- To suggest ways and means of improving the status of tourism in the state.

### **Branding the North-Eastern India**

Destination branding is process of developing a unique identity or personality for a tourist destination and communicating the same to the visitors using a name, a tagline, a symbol, a design or a combination of these to create a positive image (Harish, 2010). Destination branding is to create a distinctive identity of a destination by combining all the attributes associated with that destination and making it different from its competitors (Amit, 2010). Social media, like blogs, twitter, face book etc, also offers innovative ways to develop customer relationship management strategies to effect enterprise image, influence target end users through electronic word of mouth (UNWTO 2013 as cited in Noti, 2013). Consumer generated media is a “new form of word of mouth that serve information needs by offering non-commercial, detailed, experimental and up to date information with an access beyond the boundaries of one's social circle (Yoo and Gretzel, 2013).

Bordoloi and Agarwal (2015) suggested that North East India should build and maintain an image of destination of moderate cost and modest infrastructure but extremely rich in experience in terms of hospitality and touristic exposure. Revealing tourism potential of NER to tour operators of national and international repute can promote tourist packages among tourists intending to visit North Eastern States (NESs). Studies have outlined the importance of sub-regional economic grouping with South East Asian nations and linking it to North East India for promotion of tourism among others. The region's endeavor to establish much needed corridor between India's North East (NE) as a bridge to South East Asia for economic cooperation and to



make it a hub for trade and commerce as well as a popular destination (Ryngnga, 2011). Both the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar (BCIM), being the sub-regional groupings, shares two common countries (i.e. Myanmar and Bangladesh) pass through predominantly three NESs, namely Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur. Tourism is one of the focus areas of BIMSTEC and BCIM and also for India represents another opportunity to extract mileage for its Look East Policy (LEP) though cooperation with Myanmar to develop NER as a tourist destination (Sharma and Rathore, 2015). Sen et al (2011) reported that transit route through Bangladesh can integrate NER of India with its mainland which set to reduce transportation cost of the route significantly. Recent opening of Myanmar route presents further opportunity for reduction of transport cost which is beneficial for peripheral NESs like Tripura. However, Gallup et al (1999) argued that infrastructure development across national border is difficult to materialize rather than similar investment inside the domicile of a country.

Recognizing the importance of statistical information for DMOs strategic management, studies recommended that high quality statistics allow a DMO to make strategic changes to programming and maximize resources. DMO can use tourism statistics to inventory destination products, access capacity, monitor changes and better ensure market positioning by ensuring that rates and availability are commensurate with the competition. Regular collection of data either through survey or online or in person can ensure better understanding of tourism supply and demand at the destination. DMOs can also provide training to members to improve destination management, business practices and community interaction. The present piece of work is an attempt to understand the issues involved in collaborative destination marketing in the case of Tripura and the ways and means of strengthening it to serve the desired end.

### **Tourism in Tripura**

Tripura was a princely state under Indian Union during 1947 attained statehood in 1972. Having an area of 10491.69 sq km, it is a landlocked state surrounded by neighboring country Bangladesh on its North, South and West side. The length of its international border with Bangladesh is 856 km (or 84 per cent of the total border); the rest 16 per cent of its border is shared with Indian states" of Assam (i.e.53 km) and Mizoram (i.e.109 km). The state is connected with the rest of the country by National Highway No.44, which passes through Tripura hills to the Karimganj district of South Assam.

The State has over 60 per cent of the geographical area under forest cover, out of which about 6 per cent of the area under protected in the form of four wildlife sanctuaries. In the last few years, a number of eco-park has been added list of state tourism sites. The typical topography and demography of the State, with a sizeable tribal people from nineteen communities of varied traditions and culture, presents an opportunity for promotion of tourism in the State. Seven parallel hill ranges clothed with forests of varying density and a number of rivers dotting the valley with adjoining hill ranges and tribal helmets; provides a perfect landscape for tourists with different tastes and preferences. Jampui hill range is the highest hill range in Tripura situated in the northern part bordering Mizoram. Innumerable low altitude trekking routes that marked the area can draw adventure loving tourists to venture out for trekking.

Tripura is blessed with pilgrimage, archeological, and leisure tourism products since princely times. Pilgrimage tourism for Hindus and Buddhists needs special mention. The places of Buddhist interest include Buddha Temple at Agartala, Pilak at Manu Bakul, South Tripura, Temple at Pecharthal, Boxnagar in West Tripura. The terracotta plaques of Pilak draw a number of tourists across the globe. There is a possibility to interlink Buddhist interest in the state with



neighboring country Bangladesh. Mainamoti in Bangladesh is just 70 kilometers away from state capital Agartala. For Hindu pilgrims, Mata Tripureswari Temple at Udaipur, South Tripura, one of the 51 pithas as per Hindu mythology, is considered as sacred place for Hindus along with Kamakhya Temple at Guwahati, Assam. The other places for Hindu pilgrimage Kali Temple at Kamalasar, Shiva Temple at Unakoti etc. needs special mention. Apart from these, state is dotted with a number of temples having a history of more than 300 years. For leisure and nature loving tourists", wildlife sanctuaries, eco-parks, sightseeing spots, beautiful landscape, small hill station Jampui hill as well as monuments presents plethora of opportunities to venture upon.

Tripura has registered highest Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) per capita growth rate among 33 Indian states" and Union territories in the year 2013-14 and its per capita income growth rate for 2013-14 was estimated at 8.16 per cent (GoT 2014). However, in spite of possessing rich tourism resources, the sector failed make meaningful contribution to Net State Domestic Product (NSDP). The state failed miserably in drawing foreign tourists in its territory. In the domestic tourism front, the state could attract reasonably good numbers tourists to visit Tripura.

The purpose of travel of domestic tourist visiting from other states to Tripura suggests that 72 per cent of the visitors came for social reasons, 16.3 per cent for other purposes, 9.4 per cent for leisure and 2.3 per cent for business during 2019-20. The state draws blank in religion, education, health and shopping. Inside the state, the trips undertaken for the purpose of travel shows almost same trend as shown in the case of visitors from other states" to Tripura with the exception of health and religious purpose during the same period. Social purpose travel inside the state has gone upto 82.3 per cent, followed by health and medical purpose (7.5 per cent), leisure (5.4 per cent), others (2.5 per cent), religious (1.1 per cent) etc. (GoI, 2018).

**Table 1**  
**District wise inflow of tourists in Tripura during 2019-20.**

District	Foreign Tourist	Domestic Tourist	Total
West	2851	168481	171322
North	142	28739	28881
South	184	31617	31801
Dhalai	---	784	784

Source: Directorate of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, Govt. of Tripura, Agartala.

The above table indicates district wise inflow of domestic and foreign tourist visiting Tripura during 2019-20. The table reveals that West District accounts for highest number of tourists" inflow (domestic and foreign) followed by South, North and Dhalai Districts in that order. In terms of percentage, 73.59 per cent of the total tourists have visited West District, followed by South District (13.66 per cent), North District (12.41 per cent) and Dhalai District (3.37 per cent). The same trend continues even today.

In the marketing front, state tourism department resort to conventional marketing practices through distribution of brochures, leaflets, occasional participation in fairs and festivals at national and international level as well as rare trips to abroad. It also organizes annual tourism festivals like Pilak festival, Nirmahal festival, Orange festival in Jampui Hill for attracting visitors. Updated state tourism website is also used as a mechanism to bring tourists to this landlocked state. Similarly, state tourism information centers are working in Kolkata and Delhi catering to the needs of tourists visiting Tripura. For advertisement and branding, the state is



entirely dependent on „Incredible India Campaign" for attracting tourists.

Transportation has always been a cause of concern for the landlocked state. Porous road network via Karimganj district of South Assam badly affected state's progress for development. The Asian Highway Project hardly touched Tripura further worsened the state of road interlinking the landscape. In the given situation, it is imperative for the State to seek greater regional integration through economic initiatives connecting the state with South Asia Sub-region. As the Dhaka (capital of Bangladesh) is just four hours" road journey from state capital Agartala, it is only viable option left for the state to tie up joint transportation network and also connectivity to one of the major cities of this sub-region. In July 11, 2001, bus service was launched to connect Dhaka with Agartala to facilitate flow of commuters between these two destinations. Foreign nationals visiting Dhaka has the option of travelling to Tripura via Akhaura border post with appropriate visa. Subsequently, on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2015 first direct bus between Kolkata and Agartala through *chicken neck* via Bangladesh flagged off by politician from both the parties. This step reduces the distance between two terminal points from 1650 km to 515 km pave the way for increased influx of tourists (both domestic and foreign) from metro station to Tripura. Recently, metre gauge railway track in the state replaced with broad gauge track which can reduce the time required to visit the state, when fully operational.

Efforts are on to extend this railway network to Bangladesh's Southeastern city of Akhaura, a fifteen km long track, linking it with Chittagong port, Sylhet and Dhaka through Indian initiative. An agreement to this effect was signed between Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh and his counterpart from Bangladesh, Sheik Hasina in January, 2010. As Bangladesh enjoys trade surplus with Tripura, it is also beneficial for them to collaborate with Tripura for greater economic interest. Apart from these, Agartala airport provides direct connectivity to Kolkata and Guwahati International Airport plying close to 100 flights weekly between them

### **Tourism Impacts of Regional Economic Initiatives**

In 1997, Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), involving countries like Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Srilanka, Thailand, Nepal, Bhutan, and in 1999, Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) sub-regional groups opened up door for inter-regional trade and tourism facilitation for entire sub-region in general and Tripura in particular (Sharma and Rathore, 2015). Both the BIMSTEC and BCIM route directly share two common countries i.e. Bangladesh and Myanmar and three NESS namely Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur. Recently, Kolkata (West Bengal) to Kunming (China) (K2K) initiative was launched with sole aim to promote trade and tourism amongst landlocked sub-regions. The following figure 2 depicts the route which essentially covers BIMSTEC, BCIM and K2K initiatives across the sub- region (CSIRD, 2013)

Logistical issues of Tripura in terms of connectivity, tough terrains--- which slowly but surely addressed through multiple links opening up via Bangladesh, Myanmar. Having close geographical proximity with strategically important cities Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh would definitely help the state as a strategic location of India's gateway to Southeast Asia. Tourism is one of the focus areas of BIMSTEC which augur well for industrially starved state like Tripura. Table 2 depicts foreign tourist arrivals of select South Asian countries during 2016-20. India registered highest foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) during the period followed by Maldives, Srilanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan in descending order. In terms of compound annual growth rate (CAGR), Bhutan tops the list followed by India, Maldives, Nepal and Srilanka in that order. Intra-regional travel amongst SAARC countries (see table 3) reveals interesting statistics for member nations during 2020. India registered the highest intra-regional



tourist arrivals followed by Srilanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Maldives in descending order during 2020. As all the countries in the region are availing the benefit of intra-regional traveling to each other, combined with mutually beneficial marketing efforts of these countries can draw tourists from other regions of the world.

### Conclusion

In most State-controlled tourism destinations in India, the concept of destination marketing has not yet taken roots. For instance, despite possessing beautiful palaces, monuments, archeological sites, pilgrimage centers, protected areas, picturesque landscape, low hill ranges and a host of sightseeing spots traversing the territory, the State of Tripura in India is yet to come up in the international or even national tourism map. However, since 2004, thanks to the activism of some of the intergovernmental agencies such as the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Initiatives, things are slowly changing for good. While the State government did not have the vision of integrating tourism opportunities of this border State with the neighboring countries, extra-State actors in the nonprofit and intergovernmental sectors have pitched in themselves as change agents. However, local administration's disinterest in marketing orientation has not changed and this poses bottlenecks. This descriptive case study examines some of the nuanced tourism developmental issues of Tripura, a destination forced to be in the periphery despite its plethora of tourism resources.

Attractions serve no purpose, in the absence of a credible brand that symbolize them altogether (Henthorne et al., 2016). Pilgrimage and archeological tourism can be promoted in the state, attached to Brand Tripura. In this regard, state tourism products can be displayed in national and international media through "Incredible India campaign". Similarly, mandatory participation in travel and trade fairs of national and international importance to showcase not only the tourism products but also art and craft of the state will be of great help. Further, sponsored conducted tours for tour operators from abroad, both for inbound and outbound, can cleanse the image of the destination from a brief spell of terrorist affected state. Similarly, periodical collection of tourist profiles would help in shaping up marketing strategies for target segment. However, the host community's unwillingness and overall tourism preparedness has negatively affected progress.

Promotion of independent tours from abroad along with conducted tours would facilitate the plight of FTAs in this state. People of this State are waiting for their opportunity to strengthen their direct ties with Eastern India for mutual economic ends as it was there before partition of Bengal. A cursory glance over above-mentioned facts suggests that the possession tourism products like heritage, ecotourism, and pilgrimage tourism products offer an opportunity for the state to draw this segment of foreign tourist from already saturated tourist destinations both inside India and across the border. For inbound tourists, it also presents an opportunity to venture out a new destination of different kind for the first time visitors.

It should be noted that this study is based largely on literature reviews and secondary data. There is a paucity of research on peripheral tourism destinations like Tripura and even the existing research comes from other regions of the world. Developmental models cannot be copied, given the contextual dissimilarities. The secondary data that we harnessed for analysis was collected for other purposes and this too limited the scope of our interpretation. Meaningful destination development models should emerge locally and the researchers are aware that this implies more firstperson dialogues with stakeholders. Future researchers could advance this analysis by integrating tourism developmental issues with theoretical perspectives drawn from developmental economics and community development studies. As we observed, the root causes



of tourism underdevelopment in Tripura is much deeper than marketing or promotional issues. The conclusions of this paper should be seen only as a preliminary step towards this.

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