

## **TOURISM POLICY OF ASSAM 2008**

### **Introduction.**

The sustained and rapid growth of tourism during the last fifty years is considered to be one of the most notable developments of the last century. United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has pointed out that since 1950 the inflation-adjusted income from tourism has grown at a staggering rate of 11 per cent a year. The number of international arrivals has risen from 25 million in 1950 to 808 million in 2005 representing an annual average growth rate of 6.5 per cent over more than half a century. The receipts generated have grown twice as fast as reported by UNWTO, 'far outstripping' the growth rate of the world economy. In terms of output, tourism has become the biggest industry in the world.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the industry was struck by a series of catastrophes – natural and man made – the most remarkable being 9/11, when ironically the very symbol of modern tourism, the aircraft, was used as a means of destruction. But tourism has always showed resilience and bounced back to the projected growth rate. UNWTO is confident that its 2020 projection of 1.6 billion arrivals creating \$2000bn in tourism receipts alone- a staggering \$500m a day- will materialize.

The future opportunities that tourism opens up are even greater than what the statistics show. Tourism is a multi-dimensional activity and its full economic impact across different sectors of the economy is often not visible. And much potential still remains to be exploited. As UNWTO points out, only about seven per cent of the population of the world who are capable is actually traveling at present. Tourism thus opens up immense opportunities for economic development. But it is widely recognized that the benefits of tourism are not only economic. Tourism creates wealth in the communities and being highly labor intensive, it opens avenues for employment. Tourism's potential for poverty reduction has been extensively documented by the UNWTO. Its positive impact on environmental and cultural enrichment, development of remote areas, women's empowerment, national and international understanding is well known.

Tourism in India, though yet to achieve its full potential, has made rapid strides in recent years. It is contributing 5.9 per cent to the GDP of the country and creating about 42m jobs directly or indirectly. Government of India aims to achieve a target of 10m international tourist arrivals and 760m domestic tourists by 2011.

Assam has tremendous strength of tourism attractions like scenic beauty, cultural variety, ethnic mixture, and diverse flora and fauna. Such wealth of tourism resources endows Assam with comparative advantage over many other states. Yet for a variety of reasons this advantage has not brought for Assam the preeminent position that it deserves. It is therefore imperative to give a dynamic thrust to tourism promotion and to chart out bold, new directions to tourism growth. Tourism is a journey of imagination. Imagination nurtured with a vision can open up infinite possibilities for tourism in Assam.

**1.The Vision:** The Tourism Vision of the State is to manage its comparative advantage in tourism resources and attractions in a sustainable and integrated manner to make Assam a major national and international tourism destination so that tourism enriches the quality of life and culture of the people and becomes an important catalyst for economic development in general and for poverty alleviation in particular.

**2.The Objectives:** The broad objectives of the Tourism Policy are –

- To make tourism an important tool for socio-economic development of the state and place the tourism sector on a **high priority** in the economic development of the State.
- To fully harness the tourism potential of the State in such a manner that it becomes **environmentally sustainable, socio-culturally enriching and economically beneficial** to the people.
- To create awareness among the people about the importance of tourism and evolve suitable institutional arrangements for **effective participation** of the people in promoting tourism, sharing the benefits and in developing a tourism friendly environment.
- To improve the **quality of** the existing tourism products to meet the new and emerging demands of tourists and to enable them to have “unique experiences” that they look for.
- To promote adequate and comprehensive development of infrastructure of international standards.
- To devise pragmatic and long term **Human Resource Development Program** to create capacity for the local people to take advantage of the opportunities offered by tourism development.

**3.The Strategy for development:**

- 3.1 The general strategy will be one of **planned, focused and prioritized** development. A **Master Plan** for the integrated tourism development of the state will be prepared. It will give highest priority to the development of the National Circuits within the region and provide for linkages to other circuits to be developed.
- 3.2 The available limited resources will be utilized on the basis of carefully decided priorities so that maximum return to investment is achieved.
- 3.3 Within the broad framework of the Policy for sustainable tourism development, **domestic tourism** will be given high priority along with international tourism.
- 3.4. To ensure that the benefits of tourism developments are not concentrated in some areas only, a systematic development approach will be adopted.
  - A **benchmark survey** of all the tourism potential and attractions will be undertaken in every district of the state.

- The survey will identify the products and attractions **according to their importance** in three categories –a) of purely local interest. b) Of regional importance c) of national and international importance.
- Once the potentials are so identified and categorized, long-term plans for development, phased in order of priorities, will be drawn up. As resources are limited, the funding will also be phased out and apportioned to different sources in order of priorities. In general, the category (a) will be primarily funded out of local development funds, category (b) out of state government's budget and the category (c) which are of national and international importance, out of funds received from the national government and international agencies.

3.5. The survey will also identify all the heritage buildings, monuments, archeological sites etc., which are not protected and maintained by any agency now. All such products will be protected and preserved through a **Heritage Preservation Act**.

3.6. A framework for **Public Private Partnership** will be developed so that public capabilities and private enterprise can join hands to maximize tourism development. The framework will facilitate private participation in the tourism development activities in greater measure.

#### **4.Product Development**

4.1. Good product quality and ambience, ease of access and facilitation are *sine qua non* of tourism development. The state government will follow a policy of integrated and comprehensive development of the tourism attractions so that the tourists can have unique and enjoyable experiences. **Sustainability** will be the key consideration and it will be ensured that in the process of development the intrinsic quality of the product or the natural ambience are not affected in any way.

4.2 In addition to the national tourism circuits within the state, more state circuits will be identified for comprehensive development. These will be both thematic like adventure and eco tourism and geographical, covering the attractions of a region. These circuits will be linked and integrated to the national circuits so that tourists have option of choosing their product of interest and can see the variety of the state without hassle. For example, a state circuit of the Barak Valley and North Cachar Hills could be linked to the national circuit connecting Shillong and Kaziranga to facilitate free flowing tourist traffic between these areas.

4.3. These subsidiary circuits and particularly the regional circuits will primarily focus on the **domestic tourists**.

4.4 All infrastructure requirements of the circuit will be developed in a planned, prioritized and integrated manner. Some of the basic new features of such development will be.

- ✓ In all the circuits, road linkages will be carefully planned. An appropriate locations of the journey there will normally have a **modern**

**wayside facility center**, which will be normally managed by the local communities. These centers provide toilet facilities, food and accommodation and also serve as the outlet for local craft and culture. In fact the wayside facilities become a part of the tourism attraction itself.

- ✓ In addition, each petrol pump on the major roads will be compulsorily required to provide basic wayside facilities for public.
- ✓ All the roads leading to the tourism destinations will be marked by **internationally accepted road signage**.
- ✓ Each major tourism destination will have a **properly designed souvenir** shop. Local entrepreneurs will be encouraged and assisted to develop authentic designs of local art and craft forms in a way that the tourists can easily carry them as mementos. Post cards and thematic books of good quality on Assam and NE India will also be part of these souvenir shops.
- ✓ Major cultural, heritage and archaeological sites will be developed in a planned manner and made tourism friendly. Qualified guides will be allowed to operate in these sites. Each major site will also have an **onsite orientation facility** for educating and informing the tourists.

4.5 The tourism circuits will be developed concentrating on the strengths of Assam's tourism attractions.

- ✓ **Wildlife Tourism:** Assam has great diversity of wildlife, like the Indian one-horned rhinoceros. Apart from the internationally known Kaziranga National Park and the Manas National Park, both of which are World National Heritage sites as well as Tiger Reserves. The many other national parks and wildlife sanctuaries such as Pobitora, Orang, Nameri, Barail, Panidihing and Dibru Saikhowa have their individual beauty and charm. Tourism facilities in each of these sanctuaries will be developed with individual specialty and integrated as part of the total tourism product. The quality of tourist facilities available will be improved and proper visitor information and interpretation centers will be established in each place.
- ✓ Kaziranga will be developed into a world heritage site par excellence, Modern site and visitor management plans will be prepared through a professional competent agency and adequate fund will be arranged to implement the plans.
- ✓ **River/Lake Tourism and Adventure Tourism.** The abundant water resources and unique waterways of the state will be harnessed to provide a unique experience of adventure and leisure tourism. The mighty Brahmaputra river and its many tributaries, and many beels (lakes) have immense potential for tourism development like river cruises connecting the tourism destinations and water sports, white water rafting and kayaking. River tourism along with water based adventure tourism integrated into other tourism developments like rural and wildlife tourism will be a major thrust of tourism promotion.

**Protocol or guidelines** will be developed for tourism activities in and around beels. In Assam, many of the inland wetlands such as Deepor *beel*, Samaguri *beel*, historic tanks of Sivasagar, *beels* of Kaziranga, Pobitora, etc., are major tourist attractions. Some more *beels* such as Urpod in Goalpara, Dalani and Tamranga in Bongaigaon, Dhir in Dhubri and Sonbeel in Karimganj are also slowly coming into the limelight and local tourists are making visits during the winter months. There are many more such wetlands across Assam, which have tremendous potentiality of becoming major tourist attractions in future.

The guidelines will broadly address the following points:

- The lodges/watch towers or other buildings should be constructed in such a way that the view of the lake is not blocked and the water birds coming to the lake (which are major tourist attractions) are not disturbed. The natural beauty of the lake and the aesthetic value are not affected.
- Since the lake is the main attraction (in such sites), it will be ensured that the refuse and other disposables including garbage from the tourist facilities are not dumped into the lake itself.
- No colored plastic boat will be introduced in natural lakes (may be done in cases of small urban water bodies such as Dighali Pukhuri but not in Deepor or Urpod Beels). The traditional boats should be used after necessary modifications.
- **Tea, Golf and Nostalgia.** Assam tea is world reknown and is a brand ambassador for Assam. The tea gardens rolling out green carpets for miles are ideal to meet the pursuit of romantic and exotic experience of modern tourists. Many tea gardens have 18-hole golf courses- another major attraction for modern tourists. Assam in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had been a busy area for exploration of tea, oil and forests. During the World War II, Assam was a major base for Allied operations. In Assam and in the surrounding areas which formed the old Assam, these associations as well as the poignant cemeteries all over the region revive nostalgic memories for innumerable families abroad. All these aspects will be combined to develop a unique brand of tea, golf and nostalgia tourism.
- **Religious Tourism.** Assam is an ancient land known for astrological and tantric studies. It has many old pilgrim places of great significances, foremost being the most venerable Kamakhya temple. All required infrastructure will be developed and pilgrim friendly management arrangements will be introduced to make visit to Kamakhya temple a worthwhile experience. Hajo is another center where people from three religions Hindu, Muslim and Buddhism come for pilgrimage.
- **Culture and Heritage Tourism.** The rich cultural heritage of Assam, like the mythological Agni Garh in Tezpur, ancient Madan Kamdev temple, the unique secular traditions of Hajo, the unique Phat Bihu of Dhakuakhana, the rich and unique heritage of vaishnavite culture in Bkordowa , Barpeta , Majuli and the royal remains of the Ahom rule in upper Assam provide great opportunities for promotion of cultural

tourism. Through sustainable infrastructure development, preservation and enrichment of cultural tradition Majuli and other Vaishnavite Centres will be developed into major attractions. To add value and interest, 'sound and light' shows will be introduced in appropriate places like the Kareng Ghar, Agni Garh etc. The cultural products will be grouped into circuits so that different tourism attractions can be blended and comprehensive infrastructure development can take place in a planned manner.

- **Rural Tourism.** Tourists appreciate the ethnic variety, the cultural mosaic and the lifestyle of the people of Assam, which is different from many normal tourist places. This interest will be systematically developed through promotion of rural tourism, so that the tourist gets a different experience and the socio-economic benefits of tourism are spread to the rural areas. In collaboration with the Government of India, steps will be taken up for promotion of rural tourism. The focus of promotion will be local art and craft and culture. The rural tourism villages will be made part of the integrated tourism circuits.
- **MICE Tourism.** Assam is the gateway to the NE India. The great economic boom in the country is also touching Assam and the NE. Along with such developments the corporated culture makes demand for facilities for MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibition). To attract such tourists, modern convention facilities with required accommodation and other components like parking, etc., will be built. To start with, one in Guwahati and the other at Jorhat to be integrated with development of tea tourism, heritage tourism and Kaziranga National Park and World Heritage Site.
- At a suitable location, one **Theme Park-Mini Assam** will be created to give the tourists a broad feel of the entire region. It will have sections depicting different exotic plants of the area including the rich herbal plants, permanent demonstration of the life style of different tribes and ethnic groups, facilities for continuous craft exhibition of the region, museum of the life and style of the people through the ages, cultural pageantry, recreational facilities, mini conference arrangements, amusement parks and accommodation. In vision, it will be futurists, modeled after the Disney world and will be implemented in phases.

## 5. Infrastructure Development.

It is generally felt that lack of proper infrastructure is a major impediment to tourism promotion in the state. Infrastructure development will be given high priority and government will facilitate, promote and coordinate partnership with the private sector for tourism development.

To facilitate properly planned growth of tourism infrastructure, areas in the vicinity of major tourism destinations will be specified as **Tourism Zones**. Each Zone will have earmarked space for all tourism infrastructures like hotels, shopping and cultural activities.

Tourism department will work as the nodal agency to facilitate private sector investment. A Facilitation Cell will be put in place to enable the private sector to get 'one stop' approval of projects.

Easy access to tourism destinations is a primary requirement of tourism attractions of a place. Development of road communication to the tourism destinations will therefore be given high priority. Subject to other sectoral priorities, such roads will be given preference in the concerned departments' programmes.

Accessibility to and within the region being a major problem, with the help of the Ministry of Civil Aviation, **Guwahati will be developed as a major national and international air hub.** The other airports at Tezpur, Jorhat, Silchar, Lilabari, Dibrugarh and Dkhubri (Rupshi) will be refurbished as part of the tourism circuits and linked more closely to the national circuits of the NE. Initiative will also be taken to link Guwahati with other potential destinations in the near abroad.

In tune with the 'Look East' policy of the Government of India and to exploit fully the opportunities for tourism expansion opened up by the **Asian Highway**, particular attention will be given to connect the destinations by good all weather road links.

Availability of land is often a constraint to development of tourism infrastructure. Government will identify suitable land in the Tourism Zones and create a Land Bank. Pragmatic guidelines for allotment of land to the private sector on lease, outright sale or rent will be formulated.

## **6. Incentives.**

Suitable incentives policy identifying tax benefits and cost subsidization to encourage private investment in tourism infrastructure will be formulated. Following incentives are proposed to be extended to specified industry in the tourism sector.

- Reimbursement of Value Added Tax. Up to 25% of tax paid during one financial year will be reimbursed by the government. This benefit will be available for five years from the year 2008-09. The approved tourism units located at important tourist places shall be eligible for this benefit. Minimum investment should be of rupees one crore.
- Reimbursement of Luxury tax. For new hotels, up to 25% of tax paid during one financial year will be reimbursed by the government during the next year for a period of five years from 2008-09. The approved tourism units located at important tourist places shall be eligible for this benefit.
- Investment subsidy General investment of 10% capital cost including land, building, furniture, furnishings, equipment, landscaping, etc., subject to a maximum of Rs 10 lakhs will continue for approved tourism units. Special package of incentive will be considered for channelising Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in tourism and infrastructure projects.
- There will be provisions for providing investment subsidy to the following

1. Hotels and resorts, which are below 2-star category and not located in urban areas.
2. Tourist Lodges in and around tourist centers.
3. House boats and floating restaurants.

The maximum eligibility of investment subsidy will be Rs. 10 lakhs or 33.5% of the total investment / project cost, whichever is less (on the basis of certified accounts by Chartered Accountants).

- Performance oriented incentives on power lines to resorts up to Rs 10.0 lakhs.
- Encouragement to Public Private Partnership (PPP) for creating quality tourism infrastructure and ensuring better management in tourism projects.

**6.2 Awards.** Performance oriented awards will be given to various sectors involved in tourism industry.

## **7. Regulation of Quality, Safety and Security.**

To promote environmentally, culturally, socially and economically sustainable development of the tourism industry in the state in a coordinated manner and to prevent unplanned, mushroom growth of tourism related activities, the State Government will put in place a regulatory mechanism for furtherance and in consonance with the aims and objectives of this Policy.

Government will formulate a compulsory system of certification of the services in tourism like accommodation units, restaurants, tour operators, tourist transport, etc. The Regulations will lay down standards for various services and government facilities and incentives will be extended only to those who fulfill the norms. The accredited hotels, restaurants, taxis, buses, etc., will be allowed to use the logo of the Assam Tourism on payment of a royalty.

Safety and security of the tourists visiting the state will be accorded highest priority under this Policy. The State Government will put in place appropriate mechanism for this purpose.

## **8. Human Resource Development.**

The quality of tourism attraction depends largely on the quality of services provided. The state is in short supply of trained manpower in the hospitality sector. Comprehensive plans will be drawn up to create a pool of trained manpower for realizing the future tourism vision.

The Hotel Management Institute at Guwahati will be upgraded to a **regional institute** with the assistance of the Government of India.

Food craft institutes are excellent institutes for capacity creation at the cutting edge level and provide highly employment oriented training. **Food Craft Institutes**

will be set up at appropriate places of the state to meet the local requirement of the industry.

8.4 Government will encourage the private sector to set up new institutions by providing suitable incentives.

In the short run, these measures will not be able to fully meet the demand for trained manpower that will arise in all the tourism establishments in the state as a result of tourism growth in future. There are large numbers of small establishments outside the cities and towns who are likely to benefit from the spread of tourism. Such establishments do not have access to trained manpower. Therefore, in collaboration with the private sector, a **training of trainers' scheme** will be launched to cover as many establishments as possible to train various categories of people engaged in the tourism industry like cooks, waiters, guides, taxi drivers, bell boys, etc.

8.6. Since river tourism and water sports will be thrust areas, safety norms will also have to be rigidly enforced. The region will need a large number of trained manpower who will be imparted training at appropriate institutes. A water sports destination will be set up in the state to take care of all the requirements of Water Sports.

## **9. Marketing and Promotion- Creating a Brand.**

In spite of its tremendous tourism attractions, Assam gets only a handful of international tourists. The situation can be improved only by aggressive marketing. A comprehensive marketing strategy will be drawn up in consultation with internationally reputed professional agencies. A **brand image** of Assam in the pattern of the 'Incredible India ' will be developed, portraying the state's uniqueness and projecting how it is different from other competing destinations.

The marketing strategy will be focused on identified source markets. Extensive market research will be undertaken to identify the source markets for Assam and then to develop and position the tourism attractions to suit the demand of such markets.

For this purpose an interactive website will be created that will also have links to the Ministry of Tourism website, all other states of the NE as well as service providers in the private sector. In this way the prospective traveler will be able to get all the information and service at one place.

9.3. To acquaint the source markets about the richness of the state, one '**Festival of Assam**' will be organized in identified major markets once in every three years.

9.4 Assam will also effectively participate in major international tourism fairs. Such participation will be organized jointly with the private sector as part of the policy of PPP so that the presence is impressive and a comprehensive picture of the state is presented to the visitors.

9.5 Suitable incentives will also be provided to national and international film industry to use Assam as the locale for films. Such film shooting will also help to provide the outside world a correct and positive impression about the state.

## **10 A Sustainable Tourism Guideline.**

Sustainable development is the guiding spirit of the new tourism policy. All the activities outlined above to promote tourism will be subject to the scrutiny of sustainability. In particular,

- People being at the center of all tourism activities, in the tourism destinations Local Committees will be formed in the pattern of Local Agenda 21 formulated under Rio Declaration.
- The local committees will be encouraged to adopt the Global Code of Ethics adopted by the UNWTO as relevant to them.
- A comprehensive Sustainable Tourism Guideline will be formulated taking into consideration the special features and needs of the state. These guidelines will be the guiding spirit in achieving the long-term tourism vision.
- The entire Northeast also has its variety of unique architectural designs, evolved throughout the ages, taking the local needs into consideration and blending with the surroundings and environment. They are also aesthetically beautiful. An architectural norm that takes into account the sustainability of the old designs and blend the functional requirements of the modern times will be formulated. In the tourism sector all concerned will be encouraged to follow such norms so that the landscape is not dotted with unimaginative eyesores of constructions.

## **11 Organisation.**

Building up an effective and adequate organization is a prime requirement for realization of a vision. To translate these ideas into action some organizational changes will be required.

- An **Assam Tourism Council** shall be formed with members drawn from the concerned tourism related departments of the State Government, Government of India and the private stake holders. The Assam Tourism Council shall be an advisory body.
- The Tourism Department will be strengthened by induction of professional from the hospitality industry and other qualified professionals for performing regulatory functions relative to safety, security, hygiene and maintenance of other standards of quality.
- Tourism is a multi-dimensional activity and depends on the coordination among all the departments of the government. The departments of Culture, Forest, Environment, Home, Roads, and Handicrafts etc must work in tandem to make a really worthwhile tourism experience. Therefore a Cabinet Committee under the Chairmanship of the Chief Minister will be set up to provide policy

directions and high level coordination for smooth and efficient implementation of the tourism policy in consonance with the priority accorded to the sector by the government.

- At the implementation level, a Committee of Secretaries under the chairmanship of the Chief Secretary will coordinate the tourism development activities and monitor the progress of implementation of the directions of the Cabinet Committee.
- In formulation of tourism plan and in giving directions for development, the involvement of all the stakeholders is essential. To achieve this objective, a state level Tourism Advisory Council will be set up. The council will have representatives from government, the tourism industry, NGOs, other stakeholders and tourism professionals.
- To achieve maximum participation of the people in tourism promotion and to make tourism locally relevant, Tourism Advisory Committees will be set up in each Tourism Zone area.

## **12 A Broad NE view of Tourism Promotion.**

Assam is the gateway to the North Eastern states. Geographically and culturally the states have interdependent relationship. A total NE perspective in tourism planning, where the strengths of each state complement each other is beneficial to all and is a constructive way forward for tourism promotion. Assam will play a proactive role to develop such a wide view of tourism promotion through coordination among the states in creating zonal and regional circuits. The broad objective will be to position NE as a whole to link to the South Asian and South East Asian markets and take full advantage of the '*Look East*' policy initiatives of Government of India.