

Planning of a Community- based festival to empower local communities and their cultural identity

A study of the Behdieñkhlam Festival in Jowai Meghalaya, India

Haziel. M. BUAM, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India
Shreyas. P. BHARULE, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Abstract

Communities often identify themselves with the place they come from and more importantly the traditions and culture that they pass down through generations. The Behdieñkhlam Festival is one such festival that has been meticulously preserved by the community of the Jaintia Tribe in Northeast India over many years which has become an integral part of their cultural identity. This festival is celebrated in Jowai, in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, India. The traditional governance, planning, and celebratory aspects of the festival which is spearheaded by the community showcase the unity and cohesiveness of the tribe. This four-day long festival revolves around the community and it is fundamentally related to the agricultural cycle of the tribe. The community celebrates and prays together for a rich harvest for that year. The paper attempts to deepen the understanding of this intangible heritage of the community through the analysis of an observational survey of the festival and interviews conducted with the local community representatives and authorities of the town. This festival has garnered increasing attention of various tourists, which has led to the collaboration of the community with other stakeholders like the State Tourism Department of Meghalaya to further improve infrastructure, promote the festival, increasing the awareness of the community to preserve and reinforce the significance of this intangible tradition. Additionally, this festival also serves as a platform for various villages and localities in and around the town to address social, economic and environmental issues, educating the community and also the tourists. Hence, the study of how tourism is being accommodated into the planning and management process of this festival is crucial for this research. Consequently, this paper examines the festival from the lenses of governance, planning and tourism all of which are deeply rooted in the community and its cultural identity.

Keywords

Behdieñkhlam Festival, Northeast India, community, governance, tourism, planning

1. Introduction

Festivals are a way of promoting the rich culture and maintaining the welfare of the community (Jepson and Alan, 2016). It provides a platform for the communities to showcase their intricate governance and management system that has been imbibed in the lives of the community thereby inspiring other

communities to learn and appreciate what is being offered to them. Indigenous community festivals that have been celebrated for a long time and that are thriving on primary sources of income like agriculture are celebrated for the reason of prospering the community or for gratitude for the resources they have, other than direct revenue generation. Nevertheless, economic prosperity or social prosperity can be observed as benefits of such festivals (Mair and Duffy, 2015; Son, Huang and Padovan, 2021).

Behdieñkhlam Festival is one such festival that is being celebrated in the town of Jowai, which is the headquarters of the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya in Northeast India. This festival is celebrated annually by the Jaintia community who are known to be the indigenous tribe of the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Meghalaya is one of the states in India that has the highest tribal population (Govt. of India, 2011). The local governance system of the Behdieñkhlam Festival shows how the tribal community of Jowai participates in planning and management of the same to make the festival into a thriving space for various people to participate and also observe. This leads to the next aspect of the paper which looks into the booming tourist activity of the place due to the festival throughout the past years and it is also being promoted as a festival by the Tourism Industry.

Hence, this paper tries to understand:

Aim: “How the community benefits from the festival and consequently how its cultural identity is being preserved and shared with people coming from outside the town?”

- a) Comprehending the governance framework and the stakeholders involved in planning and managing the festival.
- b) Assessing the planning and management tasks taken up by the community.
- c) Understanding the way tourism is being incorporated into the festival.

2. Literature Review

The definition for the word “community” has evolved throughout the years (Bradshaw, 2008). Primarily a “community” is usually defined based on their geographic location however, the fact that they share common interests, traditions and heritage amongst each other is also very important (Webster, 1828). Therefore, a community-based festival is an event which revolves around the notion of community and when it is conducted it gives the community a certain characteristic or definition through which the community identifies with (Mair and Duffy, 2015). The planning of such a community-based festival by the local government should be cognizant of the way the community carry out their long-lived traditions (Wood, 2009). These festivals can also be important for community-based tourism because they can involve the local community for a holistic cultural, economic, environmental, political and social development” (Adi *et al.*, 2017).

In the northeast region of India, most of the communities are in the upper rung of the “Ladder of Citizen Participation” as the resources and lands in the community are managed by the clan or community members at the local level thereby, encouraging community-based development and tourism in the region (Arnstein, 1969). A governing body like the local government or an organisation that is involved as a stakeholder in any community-based tourism event or activity has been recognised to possess the following characteristics in order for it to be successful: “a motivator, a facilitator and a dynamist” (Adi *et al.*, 2017). Governance at local levels as explored in (Widjanarko *et al.*, 2020) observed that the role of various stakeholders is important as it reduces the chances of conflict between them, and provides them an opportunity to see benefits economically. Secondly, these festivals also facilitate social benefits like

“social justice” evoking a spirit of inclusivity and equal access as they are simultaneously celebrating their culture and identity through the festivals (Mair and Duffy, 2015).

Festivals or events have the power to change the “landscape” of the area. Though temporary, the changes or planning done to the surroundings to cater to the needs and rituals of the community can navigate the crowd to the right spaces for optimum usage of the services provided (Brown *et al.*, 2015). The conscious provision of such spaces strengthens the community in such a way that their practices are taken into consideration, where each and every one is encouraged to participate in the activities instead of just being cognisant of the characteristic of the community or their wants (Mair and Duffy, 2015).

3. Methodology

3.1 Site Context

Jowai a town located in the Jaintia Hills (West Jaintia Hills District) of Meghalaya has a municipality population of 28,430 people (Directorate of Census Operations, 2014) and is home to predominantly the Jaintia Tribe (see Figure 1) who speak “Pnar” language mostly (Administration and West Jaintia Hills District, Developed, 2025).

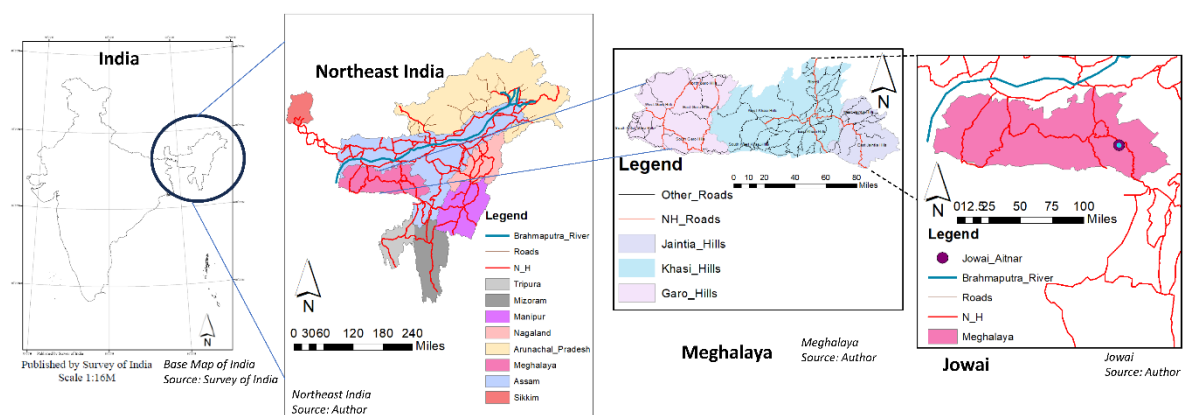


Figure 1. Location of Jowai. Source: Survey of India Online Portal, and Author

The Behdieñkhlam Festival, an important festival for the tribe, is celebrated after the sowing period of the lunar year. The festival is believed to have been celebrated for time immemorial however there were years where the festival was cancelled temporarily due to various problems (Public, 2020). The word Behdieñkhlam meant “To drive away the plague” in the past, however now, the festival is celebrated to “To drive away evils that plague the human society, bring peace and prosperity and foster fraternity” (Lamar, 2015).

The main festival is celebrated for four days and the rituals of the festival involve the community and the representatives at household levels, town level and neighbourhood levels (Lamar, 2015) (Times, 2021). Indigenous Community-Based Festivals like Behdieñkhlam Festival can be promoted as a form of Community-Based Tourism in Northeast India as it can aid in increasing the tourist footfall here.

3.2 Research Design and Data collection

The paper follows an explorative and descriptive form of research. Pictures and maps have been used in this study to convey the various aspects. An observational survey and interviews (in Khasi language and translated to English) were conducted with one of the main members of the cultural and religious organisation called the Sein Raj Niamtra Jowai (“religious and cultural organisation of the Jaintia community in Jowai”) and Sein Raj Niamtra Shillong (“religious and cultural organisation of the Jaintia community in Shillong”) where the members were asked about the festival, the governance structure that the planning and management of the festival and finally how tourism plays a role in the lives of the community due to this festival.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Governance

The Sein Raj of the Jaintia (a Socio-cultural and religious organisation) aims to preserve and revive the traditions of the indigenous religion, called Niamtre (Times, 2021). For the Behdieñkhlam Festival, the Sein Raj, takes the initiative to plan and manage the festival. There are different organisations (Sein Raj) for different clusters of villages (Raij) across Meghalaya and the members are elected from different clans and appointed by the community. The Sein Raj consists of the following members: Religious Head (U Doloi) who takes up religious and administrative responsibilities, the Priest (U Langdoh), the Priestess (Ka Langdoh), Assistant (Pator), Town Crier (Sangot) and other Assistant Priests (Wasan/ other members). The Sein Raj Jowai has fourteen members and they perform mostly religious responsibilities. An Executive Committee is formed every year where a President and Secretary are elected every year from the community. The members of this Committee look into the finance and the decoration responsibilities of the festival (information from the interviews conducted).

4.2 Community Decisions

The Religious Head (U Doloi) has the responsibility to choose the date of the festival every year. Various other decisions like these are made in the Sein Raj Jowai and these decisions are disseminated to the community by announcing them at the Religious Council (Dorbar Niam) which is attended by the community. It has also been understood from the interviews conducted that since the festival has been celebrated for many years now, the community are aware of their roles and responsibilities which displays a sense of community trust within the community.

“Happens every year so the Sein Raj takes initiative to let the community know about the various aspects of the festival. The programs are circulated in the community after the decisions are made”.

Sein Raj Jowai Representative (Translated from Khasi to English)

It is interesting to note that the Sein Raj from other village clusters or regions are also informed of the decisions made by the Sein Raj Jowai and they are informed through the Religious Council (Dorbar Niam), thereby displaying solidarity amongst the Jaintia Community in Jowai and also those who have settled outside Jowai.

4.3 Planning and Tourism: Linkages and Roles

The Behdieñkhlam Festival is an indigenous community festival which involves the active participation of various stakeholders. Therefore, this section will discuss the roles played by various stakeholders, some

who have been participating for a long time and some who joined recently as the festival has started gaining popularity in various fields like tourism and cultural studies.

4.3.1 Community

The Jaintia community of the area has the most important role to play in the commencement and celebration of this festival. Starting from preparing the area for the festival, people from each locality in Jowai (like the females of the community) are involved in the cleaning drive every year before and after the festival (Lamar, 2015). They also participate by performing various rituals throughout the festival and finally on the last day most of them are involved in making the celebration grand by coming to the celebration in their traditional dresses.

“The women participate by adorning ...traditional attires, cooking for the people and being spectators to the festival.”

Sein Raij Jowai Representative (Translated from Khasi to English)

From the point of view of providing services to the community and tourists women play an important role in opening shops and eateries during the festival (see Figure 2) which leads to economic and social benefits (Son, Huang and Padovan, 2021) and also providing their homes for tourists and researchers during the course of the festival though this is currently done informally. The males also play an important and active role in the festival, as the head of homes (when performing rituals at household level), head of the clan, head of the locality (when performing rituals at neighbourhood level), religious duties (for example felling sacred tree trunks and transporting them to their designated places before and during the festival and many more) (see Figure 2) and constructing and carrying the structures called “Rot” to the sacred ground (“Madan Aitnar”) before and during the festival (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Community Roles. Source: Author

4.3.2 Sein Raij and Government

Through the Sein Raji (a Socio-cultural and religious organisation) the community also collaborates with the government on various levels. The planning and management of human and vehicle traffic around the premises of the Madan Aitnar (the sacred ground where the festival is celebrated) was achieved meticulously in collaboration with the Police Department (see Figure 3). The entry to the main town centre of Jowai happened through the “law Musiang” where information desks were placed, and these desks were placed by the State Tourism Department and the Sein Raji (see Figure – the Designated Parking 1). The areas around the Madan Aitnar (the sacred ground where the festival is celebrated) were made walkable as much as possible. This was achieved by providing “Car Pass” to few people, mostly the locals who reside around the ground. Additionally, most vehicles were not allowed beyond a certain point and different spaces for parking were identified and provided by the community. These spaces were strategically identified so that people could easily park their cars and walk to the ground using these roads, which would take them around 9-15 minutes to reach (Loomkrywiang Road, Dulong longpiah Road and Road to Khimusniang) (see Figure 3).

Different roads that lead to the Madan Aitnar (the sacred ground where the festival is celebrated) also were designated as different zones for various activities and better circulation of people and the structures. The road from “Loomkrywiang” to the ground (road in the Northwest) was predominantly used by spectators and community to enter into the ground (see Figure 3 – the road denoted by red). The road from Dulong-longpiah (in the Northeast) was assigned chiefly for the carrying of the structures. People started the procession of the structures from the Sein Raji office located in longpiah all the way to this sacred ground through the road from Dulong-longpiah (see Figure 3 – the road denoted by yellow). The road leading out from the sacred ground to Khimusniang (in the Southwest) was reserved as an exit for the crowd and locals who wanted to leave (see Figure 3 – the road denoted by pink). Though these three roads were specifically earmarked for the crowd, other roads within the vicinity of the sacred ground could also be used for circulation. This depicts the conscious planning of the Sein Raji for the community.

In addition to the information desks the State Tourism Department also acted as the facilitators by aiding the community to improve the facilities in the Madan Aitnar (the sacred ground where the festival is celebrated) through the central scheme called PRASHAD Scheme (“Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive”) by the Ministry of Tourism, India with the aim of preserving the religious and cultural activities of the community (India, 2021). The capacity of the gallery within the premises was increased to 400 people throughout the years with other facilities being added to it. The construction of the Facilitation Centre, for tourists was finished by the Department recently in 2023, and handed over to the community just before the 2024 festival in July. However, the facilitation centre could not be used much because there were still some works that had to be finished. The Sein Raji Jowai has now taken the responsibility for the maintenance of the Facilitation Centre.

“...The facilitation centre has a kitchen, toilets (male-urinal and female toilets- 2 in number) and hall...”

Sein Raji Jowai Representative (Translated from Khasi to English)

Sein Raij and Government

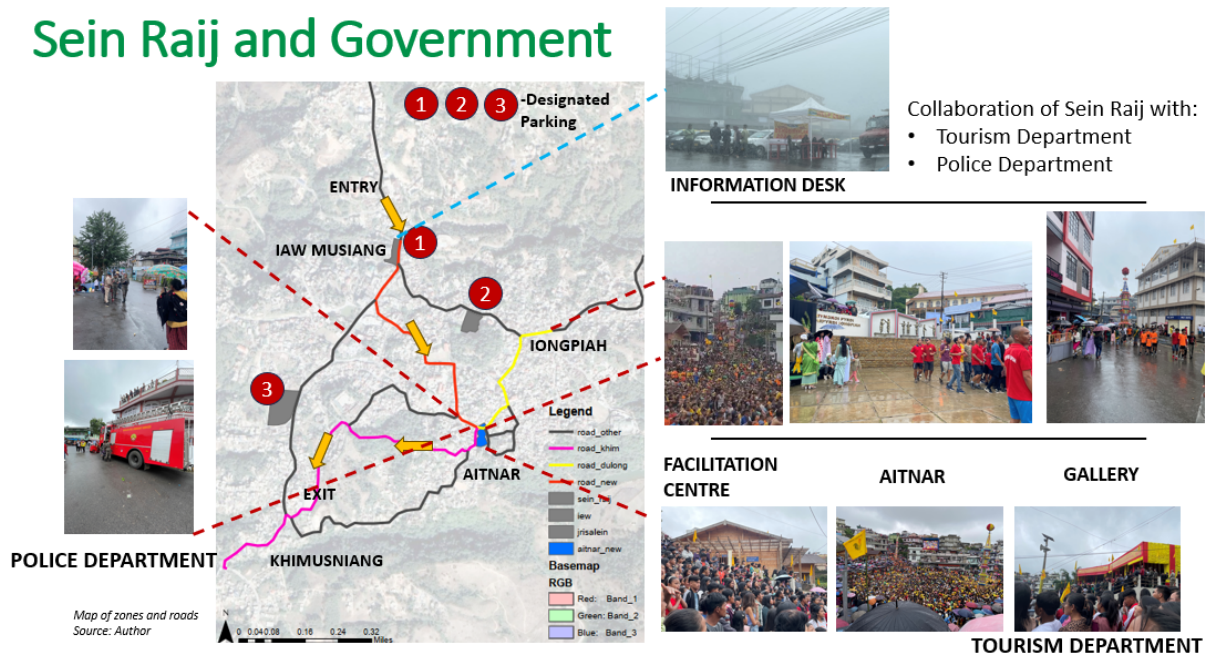


Figure 3. Sein Raij and Government roles and linkages. Source: Author

4.3.3 Other Stakeholders

The festival also included other stakeholders like the Seng Khasi (a Socio-cultural and religious organisation of the Khasi Tribe) and the Sein Raij Shillong (a Socio-cultural and religious organisation of the Jaintia community in Shillong) who joined the festival in solidarity by bringing their structures respectively to be showcased in the festival (see Figure 4). The members of The Sein Raij Shillong (a Socio-cultural and religious organisation of the Jaintia community in Shillong) highlighted that though they migrated to Shillong the capital city of Meghalaya for better opportunities, they come back to Jowai during the festival as they also have a role to play at various levels, in the rituals that are performed in Jowai.

“Most of the rites and rituals connected with Niam Behdieñkhlam of Raid Jowai are performed in Jowai itself.... Sein Raij Niamtre Shillong performed a ritual known as Ngooh Blai Choh Thyndai in each and every household of the Niamtre believers. Also, Chad Dong is organized for three days.”

Interview with Sein Raij Shillong Representative

Additionally, other stakeholders like the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) Government of Meghalaya, the Department of Arts and Culture Government of Meghalaya and others help the community by providing funds for the festival. This further iterates on the community being adaptable as times change as they collaborate with other stakeholders.



Figure 4. Structures called "Rot" brought by the Sein Raji Shillong and Seng Khasi to the festival. Source: Author

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example, the "Madan Ainar" being a sacred place of worship and celebration of the main festival was renovated to accommodate more people. Spaces outside the Sein Raji Office were chosen for placing all the structures where the procession would start. For the ease of the community and tourists, parking areas, shopping areas and separate entry and exit points for the crowd and vehicles were planned. Promotion of the festival was also done across Meghalaya by setting up banners in cities.

Additionally, "people/stakeholders" like the community members, Sein Raji Jowai, the government and organisations from other places joined together in solidarity to make this celebration a success depicting a sense of belonging in the community. The Police Department deployed their personnels for the reason of safeguarding and providing security for the community and the tourists. Their service also extended towards the management of the crowd around the vicinity of the ground. Throughout the years the addition of other stakeholders and their acceptance of the community to take help shows that they are open to welcoming people from outside the community. Therefore, we see that the community of Jowai are well adept at providing the resources (Son, Huang and Padovan, 2021) required for the festival and are also adaptable to accommodate new people into their ecosystem.

5.2 Planning-Tourism

From the survey and interviews conducted it was observed that stakeholders like the State Government saw the potential of promoting this festival through tourism (Meghalaya, 2025) (Meghalaya, 2024). While the discussion of the community providing the resources, has been discussed in the previous section, the exploration of the provision of infrastructures to support the tourism industry that has just started of late, is also important.

Conclusion

explore how the Behdieñkhlam Festival integrates governance, planning and tourism into it.

Governance-Planning

planning in the festivals pivots the focus to the way being planned by the various stakeholders every the exploration of the various resources like the that has been designated for various activities. For

The initiative of the community to be willing to collaborate with the State Tourism Department through the Sein Raij Jowai to add facilities and improve the existing infrastructure shows that tourism is an industry that can thrive here in the coming future. In addition to the renovation of the facilities on the ground and addition of new facilities, local cuisine was also sold by the locals in the festival thereby catering to the community and the tourists. The information desk at the entrance of the town made access to information very easy. Across the neighbourhoods surrounding the sacred ground various sites of architectural, heritage and cultural importance were sighted, which serves as sites of great curiosity for the tourists.

5.3 Governance-Tourism

As tourism here is still at its nascent stage, the interplay of governance and tourism leads us to explore the tourism policies that could further be added in the future. Considering the festival is purely community-based it is imperative to state that the tourism policies should benefit the community and should align with their interests as much as it benefits the tourists. The facilitation centre which was built by the Government using the PRASHAD Scheme through the Central Financial Assistance (CFA) and has now been handed over to the community for maintenance. This depicts a model where the community is given the opportunity to maintain their assets by giving them the initial impetus from other sources, thereby empowering the community.

Currently, though collaborations are seen with potential stakeholders, it was observed from the interviews that celebrating the festival is still considered to be the first priority by the community and providing the tourism services is considered an outcome of the festival which shows the pride of the community towards celebrating their culture. However, the community has started showing willingness to cater to tourists and researchers as they see that the representatives are encouraging the same by collaborating with the Tourism Department.

“Everyone is involved in the festival...Therefore, people are not free to take care of tourists personally. However, tourists from other states like Maharashtra etc. do stay in the houses of the locals during the festivals”.

Sein Raij Jowai Representative (Translated from Khasi to English)

5.4 Governance-Planning-Tourism

Finally, the interplay of the three domains- governance-planning-tourism leads to a development for the community that is holistic in nature. The study delves into the three objectives and explores how the main aim of the paper is being fulfilled: “How the **community benefits** from the festival and consequently how its **cultural identity is being preserved** and **shared with people** coming from outside the town?”:

5.4.1 Community Benefits

The festival is primarily a community festival because it brings the community together even if they are displaced to various places (Public, 2024). This is observed from the interview conducted with the representatives from the Sein Raij Jowai and Sein Raij Shillong.

“Behdieñkhlam ...brings people together with full participation. The Deiñkhlam (Giant tree trunk) of each locality brought from forest with difficult terrain on a rainy day is a testimony to the participation of the community.”

Interview with Sein Raij Shillong Representative

The festival also gives the opportunity to the community to address various social and environmental issues as also observed in (Brown *et al.*, 2015). For instance, though this festival involves the cutting of the sacred tree trunk for the festival, the community plants more trees thereby leading to an afforestation drive by the community. In addition to that the art of making the structures called “Rot” is still being encouraged within and outside the community, where showcasing of creativity and art meets the willingness to address current issues of the world.

“They cut sometimes from sacred forests or private forests if they do not find the right tree. This festival is purely related to nature because it is done after sowing because before people used to be agriculturalists. They pray to mother nature. Now since many people do not go to the forests anymore, this festival allows the people to get close to nature. They even plant trees where they cut the tree as a village.”

Sein Raij Jowai Representative (Translated from Khasi to English)

In addition to this as tourists and researchers visit the festival, they are also encouraged to visit other tourist destinations across the Jaintia Hills which improves the tourism industry (Brown *et al.*, 2015).

5.4.2 Cultural identity is being preserved

Throughout the festival the community celebrates all its traditions throughout the four days and this has garnered attention of the government, tourists and researchers as the festival is now being promoted at various platforms. This is the reason that schemes like PRASHAD scheme are being implemented for this festival thereby improving the chances of employment for the community and evoking a sense of pride in the community to continue these traditions in the coming years.

“Sein Raij Shillong endeavours to preserve the art of making tradition ‘Rot’.

Interview with Sein Raij Shillong Representative

In addition to this the community members invite friends from outside Jowai and they work as guides which allows the community to share their knowledge and encourages them to preserve their cultural identity.

5.4.3 Shared with people

Researchers, tourists and people from other parts of Meghalaya also come to Jowai during the festival. The locals are now accommodating domestic and international tourists and researchers in their homes for a span of days to months.

The community is also observing the potential they have to accommodate tourism and endeavour to increase the services and facilities required for tourism through the present funding and assistance they get from various sources like central schemes. This shows that there is a sense of awareness within the community to expand their reach through tourism.

“Since we are using the scheme for the facilitation centre... we will have to build facilities for the tourism industry here. Later, the facilitation centre could have other floors to cater to more tourists.”

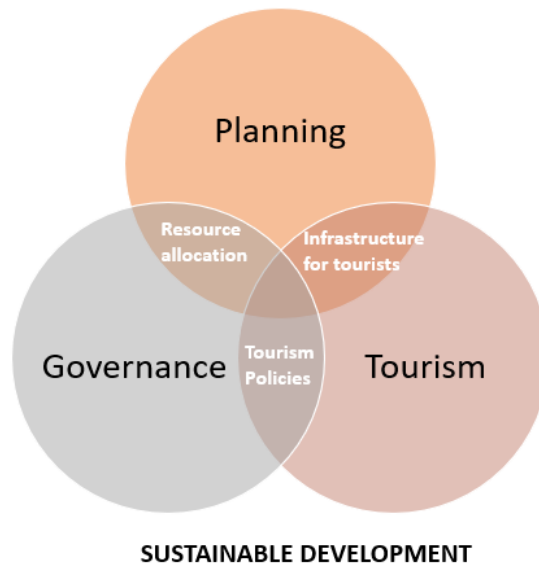
Sein Raj Jowai Representative (Translated from Khasi to English)

Figure 5. Conceptual framework. Source: Author

The Behdieñkhlam Festival is an event that embodies the true essence of how governance, planning and tourism interact with each other to preserve the cultural identity of a tribal community and how this same festival is being shared with people outside the community. The celebration of this event, with new stakeholders joining in solidarity year after year is an exemplary showcase of the efficiency of the community governance, evoking a sense of identity through conscious planning, economic benefits through tourism and environmental awareness and practices through the rituals performed.

This study has its own limitations because it could not cover the whole community, as this study is purely explorative and descriptive in nature. Further, future studies can involve community perspective on the governance, planning and the tourism, exploring the potential collaboration with stakeholders like the Tourism Department, assessing the waste management practices as tourist footfall increases and proposing a potential community-centred tourism circuit that covers other forms of destination within the Jaintia Hills.

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