

Role of urban cores in the Tourism Development of regional space.

Review of Northeast India

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Abstract

Northeast India is a region that has been untapped for many years. However, in the recent decades tourism has brought limelight to this region for its picturesque landscape, rich culture and heritage. Though majority of the population are living in the rural areas, the urban cores have budded as nodal points where industries like tourism can thrive. This paper tries to observe the role of these cities on the working of the industry throughout the region. The paper tries to understand the region from the perspective of "Place" which is defined by infrastructure services and destinations and "People" which is characterised by the tribal communities. Studying both these aspects under the purview of the formal and informal institutions leads us to realise the importance of the pivotal role of the nodal city in shaping the journey of the tourist, the perception of the community and the preservation of the indigenous practices of the region. Following this, gaps and recommendations have been put forward to try to align the goals of the tourism industry towards sustainability.

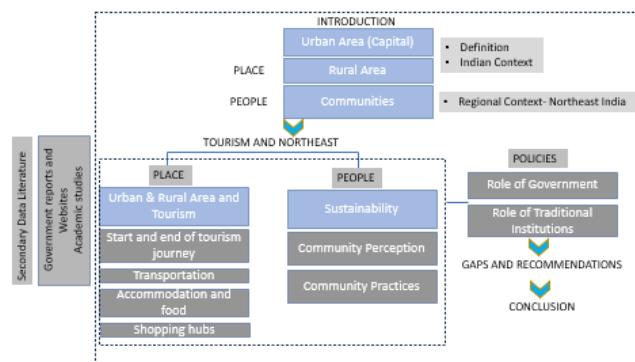
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1. Introduction

Cities are an important element of a region and pose a different impact on the way it drives the development of any sector in developing countries as compared to developed countries. This is especially true in the case of tourism where most of the time the tourist footfall is first observed here prior to the other destinations in the suburbs and the periphery (Ashworth, 2003). It becomes vital to study the role of urban space in tourism development across a regional bubble, especially in the present "climate-conscious" era. Tourism is an industry that can encompass the facets of the social, ecological, and economic areas. The Indian subcontinent, with a particular interest in the regions within the boundaries of India, boasts of diverse and unique features ranging from geographical, cultural, and economic characteristics. Within this subcontinent, Northeast India has gained much publicity for its rich natural and cultural heritage regarding tourism and has piqued the interest of many. It has been identified as a region of tourism potential, which is visible in the Tourism Policy of India 2002 (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 2002), which has encouraged the promotion of various tourism forms for its natural environment and the rich tangible and intangible culture of the tribal communities of the states. As tourist destinations in the Northeast are located both in the urban and the suburban areas it becomes crucial to understand how these urban cores pivot the travel journey of a tourist. Communities in the rural Northeast depend highly on natural resources and the environment when it comes to tourism, so the sustainable promotion and awareness of these resources to the communities and the tourists become of utmost importance starting from the cities and trickling down to the rural areas for a more "climate-conscious" region. This will provide an overall lens over the way tourism as an industry operates in the region and if inclusivity and sustainability (ecologically, socially, and economically) are core facets of the same which will lead to other doors of research like the promotion of Responsible Tourism as mandated by the Ministry of Tourism India that can be delved into for more sustainable development of Northeast India.

2. Methodology

The study follows a methodology of an in-depth secondary data literature review of journals, government reports, and studies that are associated with urban areas, rural areas, and tourism, therefore, pursuing a descriptive form of research (see Figure 1). Urban and Rural destinations will be studied after which the role of the formal institutions and informal institutions in including the community will be delved into. Following this, gaps will be identified and recommendations will be provided.



Figur 1-Methodology. Source: Author

3. Urban (Capital) Areas

Geographically, an urban area can be a city that is surrounded by towns and villages where major economic and social functions exist for a larger population and thereby influencing the nearby rural areas. In the Indian context, the Census of India defines an urban area based on the following criteria (Affairs, 2019): The urban area should have a population of 5000, the male working population that should be working in the non-agricultural sector should be at least 75% and the density of the urban area should be at least 400 persons per square kilometer. Capital cities are areas in the urban units that symbolise a power of centrality within a country where the decisions that affect the people across the nation can be observed. India attributes an area with the definition of a city when a statutory town crosses a population of 1,00,000 (one lakh). India consists of different states with their capital cities being the location of political power that were either built to be the prime locations of the country or state, others being historically motivated and providing a nodal point of contact for all the other places in the country or empires in the past and persisting to be so in the present times (Robert Maitland, 2009). India is a country that has a large population of the country residing in rural areas mostly but the urban population has been growing too. Therefore there is a need to understand the role of urban areas in the development of the regional space.

3.1. North East Indian Communities- An Urban and Rural Dichotomy

Northeast India (officially North Eastern Region, NER) is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political-administrative division of the country. It consists of the states; Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura (see Figure 1). It comprises an area of 262,184 square kilometres (101,250 sq mi), almost 8 percent of that of India.

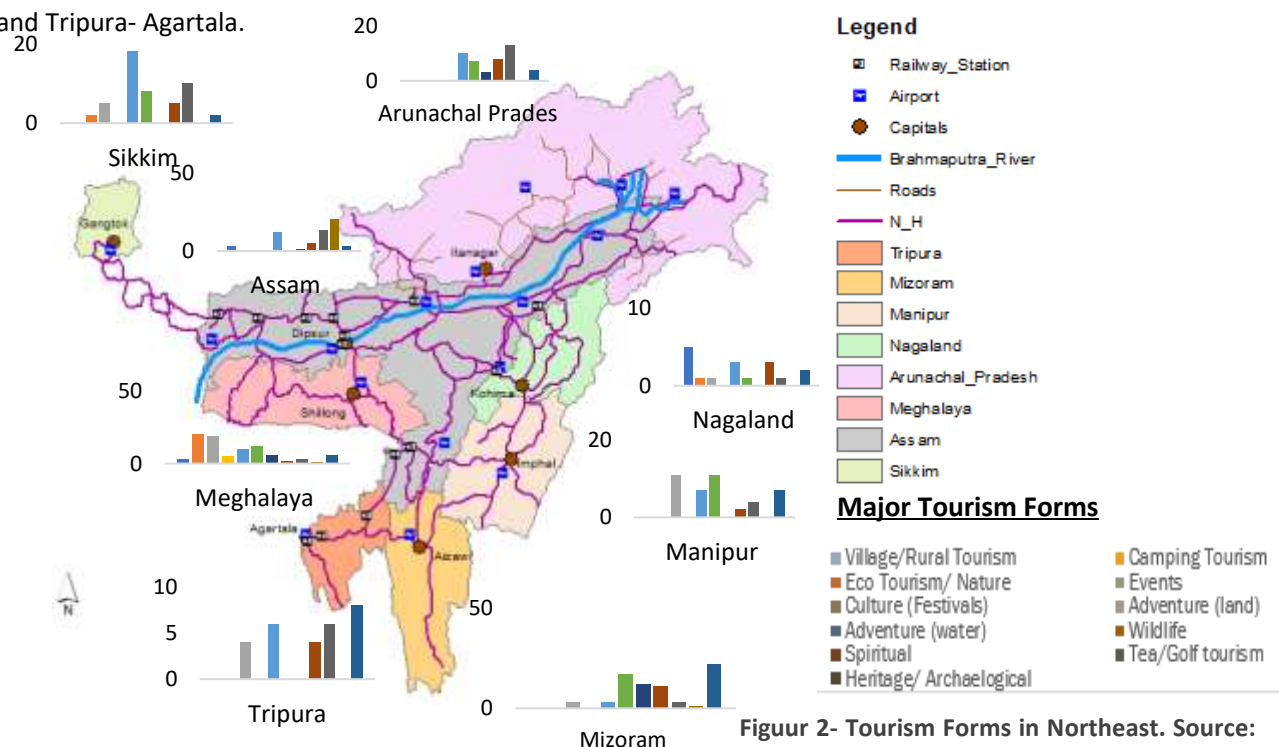
Community is defined as “a group of people who live in the same place and have common interests, attitudes, characteristics, history, identity and ownership” (Webster, 2023). Location plays an important role in defining a community. Tonnies defined the groups of people based on the location like Gemeinschaft (meaning community) and Gesellschaft (meaning society) which sprung from the impacts of the industrial revolution on the people (Britannica, n.d.) (Bradshaw, 2008). Northeast India is a region of one such community which can be called Scheduled Tribes (ST) and they are identified by the Indian Constitution. The percentage of Tribal population to total population in India (10-30%) are in places like Chhattisgarh,

Jharkhand, M.P and Orissa, (30-80%) is in places like Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura and (80-100%) are in places like Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, D & N Haveli and Lakshadweep (Office of Registrar General, 2011). Northeast India has ST communities residing in both urban and rural areas. According to (Dr. Ram Krishna Mandal, 2022) the rural population is more in most of the states in Northeast India compared to the urban population. However, urbanisation trend shows that due to better opportunities in the urban areas, the population in the same are increasing gradually in the capital cities. Therefore, the need to look at the role urban areas play in the regional aspect is very important as it has been observed by (Mitra, 1997) that urban explosion in the past years has been happening mostly in the hilly regions of the Northeast having geographical constraints thereby leading to overpopulation and unsustainable way of living.

Amidst urban explosion, tourism is an industry that can take advantage of both the urban and rural areas thereby reducing the migration of people to the urban areas for better opportunities. Additionally, it gives tourists a chance to bond with the community, meaning that the old ideas of community being rooted in only a geographical place, is starting to become redundant, and the idea of “Post-place community” becomes important (Bradshaw, 2008), expanding the limits of a community, due to advancements in technology. Tourists can come to the community and feel a sense of bonding though they are not part of the community and this reiterates the fact that tourism is an industry that has helped people transition from the former concept of “place-based community” to “solidarity-based community” where interests can be introduced to new groups of people encouraging harmony in the thought process regarding sustainability in culture and environment. Furthermore understanding the role of the government and the traditional institutions becomes even more important as this will shed light to how both parties can work together for the same.

3.2.Northeast India and Tourism

Northeast India is a region of 8 states with their capitals being as follows: Sikkim- Gangtok, Assam- Dispur, Meghalaya- Shillong, Arunachal Pradesh- Itanagar, Nagaland- Kohima, Manipur- Imphal, Mizoram- Aizawl and Tripura- Agartala.



When going through data from studies that looked at the role of the urban areas in the tourism industry and how it affected the Northeast region, it was found that not many studies have been carried out for the

same. Across various platforms, Responsible Tourism has been seen as a very relatable form of tourism that can be encouraged in Northeast India where the people and place are the core facets of the industry (Government, 2023). Official documents like the Tourism Policy 2002, Tourism Policy 2023, and many more have identified the need of focusing on infrastructure like transportation and accommodation while trying to strike a balance at sustainably catering to the community and the environment (Government, 2023) (Meghalaya, 2002). This will be further looked into from the lens of an urban and rural perspective.

4. Northeast India- Discussion of the Urban-Rural Role in Tourism

The Northeastern Region started piquing the interest of the Government of India for tourism from the Eleventh Five Year Plan. Since then it has been included in the tourism planning strategies to promote its culture and region by improving its marketing, improving infrastructure, and planning tourism circuits.

4.1.Start and End of tourist journey and the Destinations

The tourist circuits of the different states of Northeast India have been identified from the official government websites and have been mapped below (see Figure 3). It can be seen that most of the capital cities function act as the start and end of most of the tourism circuits as it was observed by (Ashworth, 2003). Capital cities here function as the first area of contact with the community when a tourist arrives and also provide tourist destinations of cultural importance and historical importance.

The capital cities also house built architecture like state museums, heritage buildings, and many more that possess historical importance to them. Festivals and events that are held by the government solely and also those in collaboration with the community are held in capital cities. Whereas those that are cultural practices of the community are held in rural areas. The government has the opportunity to tap into such festivals and events to provide a plethora of niche tourism products to tourists. Furthermore, as tourists travel towards the rural areas tourism forms like natural reserves, adventure tourism, camping tourism, and many forms which allow the tourist to get in touch with nature one on one become prominent (see Figure 2).

4.2.Transportation

Urban areas play a crucial role in facilitating transportation facilities across a region and this can be seen in the case of the Northeast as well (Robert Maitland, 2009). The presence of airports, train stations in the capital city eases the travel experience of the tourists coming to Northeast India as well (see Figure 2). The Indian Government under the “Greenfield Airports (GFA) Policy, 2008” is making guidelines to construct new Greenfield Airports across the country and the Northeast Region has also been brought under the purview of the same (Infra, 2023). The Indian government under the Indian Government’s “Capital Connectivity Project” is aims at connecting all the northeastern states by 2024-25 through train connectivity, flight connectivity, and road connectivity (Mathur, 2022).

4.3.Accommodation

Various accommodations like hotels, homestays, and resorts are a result of the prominence of tourism across the regions. Accommodations like hotels of higher star ratings can be mostly seen in the urban areas or closer proximity to the capital cities and ones like resorts, and homestays are mostly seen in the areas outside the capital city. For instance, the Meghalaya government in the Northeast has established a detailed guideline under the “Meghalaya Tourism Development and Investment Promotion Scheme 2012” for encouraging the promotion of homestays and resorts (beyond the Shillong city limits to encourage employment generation) in the region (Meghalaya, 2012).

4.4.Shopping facilities

Urban areas like cities and city capitals evolve for the use of the locals residing in the city. Shopping hubs that are considered as a service provided by the urban fabric for the people can be used by tourists as well (Gregory Ashworth, 2011). And throughout the years the prominence of tourism in the region has encouraged entrepreneurs to establish businesses that engage in retails of local souvenirs for the tourists thereby expanding the variety of shopping experiences for the people and the tourists.

4.5.Awareness and Promotion of Tourist Destinations

Studies on the importance of social media also have been done in terms of determining the destinations for tourists be it urban or rural. Maria Palazzo (2021) has studied and observed that in current times Instagram users are one of the most influential groups to promote sustainable tourism in a region. It has been perceived that the Instagram platform allows a more bottom-up approach to creating awareness and promotion of tourist destinations. This way the platform is also used to locate destinations that are similar to known and popular destinations providing a plethora of destinations for tourists to visit and at the same time experience new cultures and traditions. It has also been argued (Maria Palazzo, 2021) that rural areas are publicized more on the Instagram platform, as this could be the way influencers try to find untapped places to promote through their content.

Since domestic tourists play a major role in contributing to the Indian tourism industry promotion of the region to other parts of the nation becomes imperative. Therefore, the awareness of the tourist destinations, the tourism products it has to offer, and the indigenous culture and heritage it can nurture and promote becomes very important and this has been identified as an important facet of the development. In the past few years, festivals and conferences like “North East Food Festival, Tourism and Culture Ministers Conference of North-eastern Region, 9th International Tourism Mart, Kohima, Nagaland” and many more have been consciously organized to sensitize people to the tourism products Northeast has to offer, like food, handicrafts and many more.

It has been observed that Northeast India has been chosen as a region of great potential to tap into for the Indian Tourism Industry under the “Dekho Apna Desh Campaign”. The Look East and Act East Policy has been implemented for the northeast region for economic generation, the revival of historic culture and to improve communication with the South East Asian countries (Hiranya K Nath, 2017). This is a promising way of promoting the indigenous practices of the region to other parts of the world as well.

4.6.Sustainable Tourism of Urban and Rural areas- Role of Traditional Institutions

North-East India comprises over eight states and is home to around 700 Tribal groups, wherein much of each ethnic group is distinct from the other (Affairs, 2012). When traced and observed, the ethnography of these groups reveals that there existed simple yet intricate forms of power division, at the societal and community level indicating the presence of “Traditional Institutions” predating even the advent of colonial rule.

As diverse and different as these ethnic groups are from each other, the kind of governance that prevails over such communities also differs, in range. These may cover democratic forms of governance involving order or organization of councils that preside democratically, to near-autocratic and charismatic chiefs that command the support of strong “village councils”, comprising predominantly male members. A fine example of this, is the concept of “Dorbar Shnong”, at the village level and the “Dorbar Hima”, at the kingdom level, i.e., Syiemship, a traditional form of governance of the Khasi community (Elwin, 1965) (Haokip, 2022), spearheaded by strong councils of elected male representatives, and male members, who are allowed to participate and cast their vote, and not women. Albeit, these councils comprised all adult males, in matters of paramount and crucial importance, womenfolk and their views were included and valued, especially those of aged and senior women. These practices allude to the “Westminster System” of governance that prevails (Haokip, 2022). These traditional institutions exist to date, as religious and

social sentiments still prevail over this community, as it does for so many others. Even more so, the Monpa community in Arunachal Pradesh along similar lines established this structure of governance of “village chiefs” and de-centralized “councils”, firmly established on the concept of self-governance, dating back to a nearly thousand years (Elwin, 1965).

The genius that emanates from these generation-old community/ traditional practices, takes a more localized approach in determining the growth of such tribal populations (Elwin, 1959). This touches on the importance of identification of states where “community-based” traditional institutions are largely autonomous concerning “formal state structures”, especially in the determination of localized tourism policies, etc. Community-based traditional practices and governance in general, most often are informal, without the backing of formal written rules. This goes into the murky grounds of policymaking and the thin divide between whether the State apparatus or local community governments are better suited for the task, given the above. For this reason, it's imperative that in line with the aforementioned identification exercise, we move forward in identifying the “Initial Conditions” of any tourist space, etc., as some tourist spots possess the capacity to emerge instantly, with precise planning and large capital flow, e.g., “greenfield areas in plains”. However, on the contrary, there may also be tourist spaces that may not brag of such “locational advantages” and might require initial funding and investment in the “Transportation” sector, modernization of power and telecommunications industry and practices, etc., to address accessibility issues among others. Hence, it becomes even more important for the Government to ensure that it does not become autocratic in its approach towards tourism by way of extensively limiting community governance. It is accepted that there needs to be checks on such dissemination and distribution of power, given the possibility of misuse of power and resources by a select few. However, by way of enabling community governance, the government along with such local governing bodies would have shared governing responsibilities, making them answerable for any irregularity, ushering in a sense of accountability. Rather, the Government ought to focus on grants and investment governance, especially in light of the under-development in North-East India.

Even in the absence of proper state governance, or even tourism-related infrastructure, among other issues, local communities have risen to the task of working towards the growth of tourism regardless of such asymmetries. For instance, as per a report by the Ministry of Tourism (Tourism, 2020), India, the North Eastern region of India has a limited number of five-star hotels, compared to the rest of India. Regardless of this disability, owing to accessibility issues, the concept of “homestays” has been popularized and is widely practiced in Northeast India, as means of not only providing affordable stays but ones enriched by the cultures and lifestyles of the local populace (Bisht, n.d.). This echoes the theory of “spatial equilibrium”, wherein characterized by the uniqueness and inevitability of any given tourist space, these asymmetries can naturally result in an optimal outcome of “self-organization”. In addition to bearing a higher sense of responsibility and accountability, as mentioned earlier, community values such as the concept of “Khullang Lammar”, of the Meitei community in Manipur, meaning “reciprocity of service”, can nurture positive values in the right direction. Similarly, the Mizo community also resonates their community service to the values of “Tlawm ngaihna”, etc., meaning “self-sacrifice” and “service for the well-being of the community” (Irina, 2017). Thus, this shapes the behavior of the community, and subsequently of local governance towards tourism. The legitimacy of these age-old traditional institutions lies in the “communal” and “cooperative” temperament that characterizes the authority they exercise (Elwin, 1965).

Therefore, it becomes even more important that balancing religious, social, and cultural practices and sentiments, with the drive to put the wheels of progress in motion by bringing in reforms aimed at tackling discrimination based on sex, ethnicity, etc., meted out by the communities and also if meted out against the various communities, ought to be prioritized by the government. These traditional institutions possess considerable potential, firstly in ensuring compliance with the law at the grassroots and secondly, even more so in bearing the torch of development and progress.

As tourism is gradually growing in Northeast India, economic benefits can be anticipated however it should be understood that increasing tourist footfall means more pressure will be placed on the ecosystem of the region be it in the urban and rural areas.

4.6.1. Community Perception- Urban and Rural

Studies on the perception of the communities have been carried out (Rasoolimanesh, 2017) and the difference in their perception has been observed. Because of the availability of various services like infrastructure, a varied economic base for people to earn from and improved development of the city as a whole as compared to the rural areas, the residents in the rural areas seem to associate tourism activities as a major way of generating income. However, in the urban areas, the locals seem to be more conscious of the impact tourism has on the social and ecological realm apart from the economic area. This suggests that residents in the urban area are being informed of the effects of tourism because of accessibility to more information than those in the rural areas. It is therefore important to research the perception of residents in Northeast India and the extent of knowledge and information they have about the impacts of tourism on their surroundings and everyday life as little study has been done on the perception of the residents from urban and rural areas on tourism in Northeast India. Accordingly, awareness programs and platforms can be used to inform tourists and communities of the sustainable practices to be carried out through tourism.



Figur 3- Tourism Circuit of Northeast India. Source: Author

4.6.2. Community Practices in Northeast India

Since the land tenure system of states like Meghalaya is owned and handled by the community, the community needs to be involved as major and primary contributors (Meghalaya, 2002). Therefore, since the urban municipalities are under government authority most of the development is observed to be handled by the state government. For instance, the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) has joined hands with IHCL to construct "The Vivanta Meghalaya" through a PPP approach for better tourism infrastructure (Times, 2022).

However, tourism activities in villages like Mawlynnong in Meghalaya are managed by the community. Being appointed as the "Cleanest Village in Asia" the community has taken conscious efforts to keep the traditional practices intact within and around the village (Smruti Rekha Sahoo, 2020). Other forms of tourism have also been identified in other parts of Northeast India (See Figure 2) (Pradesh, 2021).

There have been recent projects of tourism in the Garo Hills that were initiated by the Government of India and they are as follows: "Destination Tourism, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Govt of

Meghalaya, Tourism Dept, and Adventure Tourism, Government of Meghalaya, Tourism Dept.”. There are various kinds of attractions in the Garo Hills, like natural attractions, cultural attractions (Wangala Festival, Dore Rata Dance), and rural tourism sites (Hot springs, Balpakaram) that have been involved in the promotion of rural tourism in this district. The Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the Integrated Basin Development & Livelihood Promotion Programme (IBDLP), started a project which showcases the village character and lifestyle of the Garo Hills through community participation, the Chandigre Rural Tourism Project which is closely situated near the well renowned Nokrek Biosphere Reserve (Authority, 2013). The Nokrek Biosphere Reserve is rich in ecological and cultural treasures and it was added to the list of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (UNESCO, 2019). These destinations are situated in the towns of the regions which have an urban character to them according to the definition of urban areas from the Census 2011 of India.

Another form of community-based initiative is seen in the state of Mizoram where the rural community spearheads the fire management system of the state through regulated “jhum” burning of the fields (Darlong, n.d.). This poses a threat to the environment of the state as the changing climate has been attributed as one of the major reasons for more forest fires which leads to the degradation of forests and therefore further leads to changing climate of the state. This constant loop of the changing climate and degradation of the environment calls for the need to consciously encourage the government to join hands with the traditional communities for holistic cooperation for the betterment of the region.

Most of the tourism activities in the Northeast revolve around the participation of the communities and are for the communities.

5. Gaps and Recommendations

The tourism industry asks for the need to improve the infrastructural capacity of a region that intends to cater to the growing population of tourists. However, it is important to understand that though infrastructure facilities will aid in reeling in more tourists to the region the capacity of the region to cater to the burgeoning population of tourists and the locals will be compromised.

1. Improved mobility services and roads are currently leading to traffic congestion in towns and cities like Gauhati and Shillong which disrupts the daily routine of the local people. In cities like Shillong, the increasing tourism activities are shown to be one of the activities that have put pressure on the urban fabric as congestion problems are escalating day by day which has started creating problems not only for the tourism industry but most importantly for the people of the urban areas (Times, 2023). Therefore the tourism industry cannot work as an individual entity being devoid of the inputs and considerations of these sectors like the transportation department of the states and the community. Traffic management techniques and awareness if started from the urban areas where the journey of a tourist starts, can pave the way for communities to learn from the urban areas and further lead to ease of movement across the destinations.
2. Though Northeastern cities are home to various big chain hotels it is important to understand that most of the region is highly rural. Construction of big hotels in and around the city does not lead to an equitable form of providing income to the community and also leads to an influx of mass tourism. This poses a threat to the environment and its capacity to cater to such large masses of population. Limiting the establishment of hotels in the city will provide various options of accommodation to choose from and at the same time not be a burden on the ecology of the region. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India has formulated a national strategy to encourage the establishment of homestays as a way to curb the overpopulation of tourists in a certain region or destination. Apart from these, villages across the region can come together as cooperatives to

build such accommodations which will cater to the needs of the visitors, limit the influx of visitors, and provide an experience that is wholesome for the tourists leading to low-impact tourism.

3. The tourism industry and the government of different states can start collaborating with the local craftsman and the community. Organisations like the “Commerce and Industries Centre” in Meghalaya and “The Directorate of Employment and Craftsman Training, Assam” can join hands together to promote the production of products that are handmade by the artisans and further distribute them across the region first in the tourism hubs in the urban centres or the rural destinations. Further tourism services by allowing tourists to be a part of such activities by adding these activities into the tourism circuit will pave the path to high-value low volume tourism. In addition to this tourists are able to be a part of the community therefore emanating a sense of solidarity between the tourist and the community.
4. The cities being one of the first destinations tourists encounter, it becomes important that at the beginning of the travel journeys tourists are made aware of the conscious efforts the communities have been practicing throughout the years to preserve their culture and environment. The major transportation centres, urban tourist destinations, eateries, and other areas of contact where a tourist can be anticipated to visit can set up tourist information centres where the tourists are informed of the same.
5. Social media can also be used as a platform to inform the populace of the way a particular community is managing their tourism products thereby projecting information for the audience from a grass root level. Platforms like Instagram use handles and hashtags and this can be leveraged by the tourism industry, the communities, and traditional institutions in putting themselves out into the global platform amidst a generation where the idea of conscious efforts of preserving and sustaining the environment and the people are of utmost importance.
6. It is also important to understand the perception of the community regarding tourism in the Northeast region. Studies done in the Philippines on the tourism sector in urban and rural area shed some light on the differences in how tourism can be perceived by the different groups of people because of their location. Therefore, Northeast India being a land of diverse communities living in both urban capitals and rural areas, it becomes imperative for the voice of the community to be heard, which leads to the need to perform studies on the perception of the same.
7. Various indigenous practices that are undertaken in various states of the Northeast regarding land management systems, fire management systems, tourism management models and many more can be included in the tourism circuit at a regional and local level to increase the form of tourism products, to increase the number of days of stay, to provide educational and vocational pursuits for various groups of tourists and to attract tourists back again into the destinations.

6. Conclusion

Understanding the role of urban cities in the development of a tourism industry of a region is important. This study has tried to understand the role of urban cities particularly capital cities in the Northeastern Region of India. As Northeast India is majorly rural, the capital cities project a special force that could influence the working of any industry including tourism. This study tried to understand the intricate dealings of tourism in both the urban and rural contexts and also how the formal institutions like the state government and the informal institutions each play a part in handling the tourism industry at a macro and micro level. The informal institutions have been identified to include the community in many practices across the region. However, there is still some gap that has to be bridged between the community and the state government. Therefore the collaboration of the state government, with the informal institutions and

the community in both the urban and rural areas becomes crucial to develop a form of tourism in the Northeast that is sustainable for the people and the place. This study tries to identify the various facets the tourism industry can be studied from which is beneficial for academicians and practitioners as well.

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