

TOURISM AND WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY IN GOLAGHAT DISTRICT, ASSAM

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Abstract: In the 21st century, tourism is widely recognised as a smokeless, productive global industry with a multi-dimensional activity structure and a versatile, positive socio-economic impact. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), tourism is defined as a social, cultural and economic phenomenon referring to the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes. Hence, modern tourism increasingly focuses on generative practices that can help establish a localized economy and ensure the long-term sustainability of the population. However, a society and its communities can develop itself sustainably only through the equal contributions from both men and women. The women do play a vital role in every community, but their status in the developing nations, specifically within certain regions have often been marginalised due to deep seated gender differences, customs, traditions, lack of formal education and the persisting patriarchal societal structures. Regardless, women are increasingly overcoming these barriers through exercising rights and striving for excellence. This paper therefore, examines women's empowerment in the tourism sector and evaluates the overall impact on the socio-economic development in the district of Golaghat which holds a significant tourism potential.

Keywords: women empowerment, tourism, socio-economic development, sustainability, gender equality

INTRODUCTION:

Generally, tourism can be broadly categorized into domestic and international sectors. In the 21st century, the nature of tourism has expanded dramatically, diversifying into numerous specialized fields depending upon the nature of the tourists. These include heritage or historical tourism, adventure tourism, wildlife tourism, medical tourism, pilgrimage tourism, eco-tourism, cultural tourism, educational tourism, sports tourism, Agri tourism, ethnic tourism, farm tourism, health tourism, birth tourism, boat tourism, business tourism, bird watching tourism, camping tourism, disaster tourism, experimental tourism, extreme tourism, fashion tourism, garden tourism, industrial tourism, jungle tourism, literary tourism, militarism tourism, music tourism, political tourism, religious tourism, science tourism etc (Sen, 2016).

At present, the Golaghat district is a premier destination for tourism, boasting several remarkable attractions. These include the world renowned Kaziranga National Park (a UNESCO world heritage site) with two flourishing Orchid Parks, the Nambor Forest Reserve, Deopahar in Numaligarh, tea tourism etc. have significantly promoted community based sustainable tourism. Furthermore, river and wetland tourism with significant historical sites has thrived along the Brahmaputra and the Dhansiri river. Religious landmarks such as the Athkheliya Namghar, Negheriting Shiva DouL and the Dergaon Thaan thus attract numerous visitors, which has contributed deeply towards the religious and heritage tourism sector. On the other hand, the district drives significant socio-economic empowerment of women, primarily through homestays, handlooms, colourful art and crafts or the creation of indigenous productive goods, as workers in hotels and restaurants, and which, with the help of the formation of self-help groups, have engaged themselves in numerous roles to sustain themselves and their family.

STUDY AREA:

Among the 35 districts of Assam, Golaghat district is one of the major districts, located in the eastern part of the state. It was created as a separate district on 15 August 1987 after being carved out of the erstwhile Sivasagar district. Golaghat is known for its remarkable blend of natural beauty and historical significance. It comprises several important tourist destinations of Assam, including Kaziranga National Park, which has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Deopahar Archaeological Site (Numaligarh), Numaligarh Refinery, Negheriting Shiva DouL, and several other natural sites along the Brahmaputra River. The district is well connected by various modes of transportation. The nearest airports are Rowrah in Jorhat and Dimapur in Nagaland. The major railway stations are located at Furkating, Sarupathar, Golaghat and Barua Bamun Gaon. Also it is well connected by roads, including NH-37 and NH-39, as well as state highways such as Dhodar Ali. There are six revenue circles, eight development blocks, 12 police stations and 622 villages, including Non-Cadastral (NC) villages. The total area of the district is approximately 3,502 square kilometres and comprises of three co-districts, namely Bokakhat, Sarupathar and Dergaon. Geographically, the district is bounded by the Brahmaputra River to the North, Nagaland to the South, Jorhat district to the East, and Karbi Anglong and Nagaon districts to the west.

OBJECTIVES:

- 1) To examine women's participation in tourism related activities in the Golaghat district.
- 2) To assess the impact of tourism on the socio-economic development of the people of the district.
- 3) To explore the scope of tourism for women's empowerment in the district
- 4) To identify the challenges faced by women engaged in the tourism sector in the district.
- 5) To suggest measures for enhancing women's socio-economic empowerment through tourism.

METHODOLOGY:

The present study includes both primary and secondary data and aims to examine the impact of tourism on the socio-economic status of women. For this purpose, primary data was gathered through field visits and direct observation of the selected areas, particularly focusing on women engaged in the tourism related activities. Secondary data were collected from books, magazines, research articles, seminar papers, research journals. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design, with Golaghat district of Assam as the study area.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Tourism has considerable potential to contribute to economic development in Assam. Das (2012-13) highlights that Assam's rich biodiversity, cultural heritage and natural resources provide significant opportunities for tourism development, particularly in terms of income generation and employment creation. Similarly, Phukon, Das and Borah (2020) argue that the tourism industry has the potential to generate foreign exchange earnings, create employment opportunities and contribute to regional development while reducing unemployment and economic instability. Apart from its broader economic significance, tourism also provides entrepreneurial opportunities for women. Ramchurjee and Paktin (2011) observe that women's participation in the tourism industry is relatively high; however, their employment is often concentrated in low paid and unskilled occupations. They further point out that tourism can provide women with opportunities for employment and self-employment, particularly through small and medium-sized income generating activities, however, the benefits of tourism are not distributed equally between men and women in the developing countries. Women continue to face barriers related to access to finance, skills, technology, marketing and other resources. The gendered nature of employment and decision making in tourism has also been highlighted by Bharathi (2019), who notes that although women are increasingly involved in entrepreneurial activities, their decision making is often influenced by male dominance. Similarly, Hemalatha (2020) identifies significant horizontal and vertical gender segregation within the tourism sector. Women are frequently concentrated in occupations such as waitressing, housekeeping and other lower-level positions, while men tend to occupy major managerial and decision-making positions. Women are also more likely to be employed in part-time, seasonal or lower-paid jobs, thereby limiting their opportunities for career advancement. At the same time, community-based tourism can create alternative opportunities for women's participation in the tourism economy. Hemalatha (2020) suggests that community-based tourism initiatives particularly those involving women's groups and cooperatives, can provide accessible entry points for women into paid workforce and may offer more sustainable opportunities for their economic participation. Therefore, existing studies have examined the tourism potentialities as well as the broader relationship between tourism and women's empowerment. However, comparatively less attention has been given to the specific ways in which women participate in tourism related activities at the district level in Golaghat.

HOMESTAYS AND TOURISM:

Homestays have become an important aspect of rural tourism development for women. In Golaghat district, areas such as the Kaziranga National Park, towns like the Sarupathar, Golaghat, Bokaghat, Dergaon, and the Melamora Jugeebil areas serve as vital centres for creating direct employment opportunities for the women. Here, women are primarily responsible for managing accommodation, housekeeping, proper food management, cleanliness and other essential services that are carefully maintained at these centres. Furthermore, in many parts of the populated town areas, local women sell tea, snacks, fruits, and handmade products to visitors. Some women also participate as local guides during peak tourist seasons. In Numaligarh and its surrounding areas, eco-tourism is thriving, where women in this region actively engage in eco-tourism activities through catering, cultural programs and souvenir sales which as a result boosts rural tourism. Also, in the vicinity of the Kaziranga National Park many hotels and restaurants such as Borgos, IORA, Bonhabi Resort, Aranya Lodge, Wild Grass, etc. employ a significant number of young women as receptionists. Therefore, engagements in this sector have helped women reduce economic dependency, while resulting in shifting traditional gender roles and furthermore enhancing community pride within the district.

SELF-HELP GROUPS AND RURAL TOURISM:

A Self-Help Group (SHG) is a small, voluntary association of individuals, preferably from the same socio-economic background. The number of members in a group typically ranges from 10 to 20, and eventually comes together to solve their common problems. These self-help groups receive financial assistance from National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development (NABARD), District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and Self-Help Initiative Program (SHIP) for income generating activities. Through these groups, rural women in the Golaghat district have gained access to income-generation benefits across various fields including floriculture, and for centres like, vermicomposting, embroidery, handicraft, mushroom cultivation, handloom textile centres, etc. In the district, women across all the eight development blocks have implemented various schemes through self-help groups. If these groups maintain clean and tidy centres, they can eventually become key attractions for rural tourism (like the cleanest village or the cleanest development blocks).

WOMEN, HANDLOOM AND HANDICRAFTS IN RURAL TOURISM:

In the district, women from various communities are engaged in the production and sale of traditional handwoven textiles and a wide range of handicrafts. They showcase their artistic skills through handloom products, and a wide range of embroidered handicrafts, sculptures, textiles and other indigenous crafts which have significant potential to promote the district as a unique tourist destination by utilising local talent and resources. In villages of Sarupathar, Bokhaghat, Golaghat and Dergaon, women are highly skilled in rearing Eri silkworms and spinning threads while weaving traditional garments such as 'gamucha' and 'mekhela Sador'. They also produce handicrafts made of bamboo, cane and wood. These products are highly attractive to tourists and are widely purchased by them.

WOMEN AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION:

Women play a very significant role in preserving the cultural heritage of the district, as they do in many other districts of Assam. By performing traditional dances, wearing colourful traditional attires, ornaments, preparing local delicacies, and showcasing indigenous practices, they help preserve the district's local cultural heritage while attracting tourists. Furthermore, women are actively engaged in various tourism related activities in places such as the Jugibeel area and the Kaziranga Orchid and biodiversity parks. They prepare and sell traditional local dishes such as khar, masor tenga, pitha, laru, kharisa (bamboo shoot) etc for the visitors.

CHALLENGES:

The study identifies several challenges that hinder tourism development and women's empowerment in the district. These include seasonal employment, low wages for women engaged in tourism related activities, gender discrimination, inadequate training and skill development opportunities, limited access to financial resources, prevailing societal attitudes and gender stereotypes and all the more safety and security concerns at the workplace. These challenges thus reduce women's participation in the tourism sector and limit the socio-economic benefits that tourism can provide.

FINDINGS:

The study found that several villages and rural areas in the district continue to face inadequate tourism infrastructures. Major issues observed at many tourist destinations include poor cleanliness and inadequate publicity and the absence of basic facilities such as clean drinking water. As a result, many tourists avoid visiting or are unaware about these locations. Therefore, priority should be given to improving cleanliness, enhancing publicity and providing essential facilities such as transportation, communication and other tourism related infrastructures to promote sustainable tourism development. On the other hand, local initiatives have encouraged the participation of women in tourism related activities, where, a notable example is the Jugibari Beel (Jugibeel) area in the Khumtai Assembly Constituency (LAC) of Golaghat district. Presently, the area is a recognised rural tourism hub where local women's self-help groups and community members actively participate by managing facilities, housing events and selling food or local products. Therefore, similar initiatives should be promoted in other parts of the district to enhance women's participation and improve their access to opportunities in the rural tourism sector.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Poverty remains a major barrier to women's participation in tourism development in the district. Many rural communities lack adequate knowledge, skills and capacity to engage effectively in tourism related activities. Therefore, the local administration and the district tourism departments should formulate and implement appropriate plans and programmes to enhance women's participation and promote their socio-economic empowerment.
- The government should adopt appropriate policies and planning strategies to promote community awareness, education and capacity building, adequate training and skill development among the women from varied communities and other indigenous groups in the district. Such initiatives would enable local communities to access the benefits and opportunities generated through development of the tourism industry.
- Financial assistance and incentive schemes should be provided to women to encourage their active participation in tourism related enterprises. Greater involvement of local communities will contribute to the economic, socio-cultural and environmental sustainability of the tourism sector in the district.
- Small scale tourism projects should be promoted with the active participation of women under the supervision and support of government agencies. At the same time, an effective institutional mechanism should be developed to ensure community participation and the successful implementation of these initiatives.
- Furthermore, tourism stakeholders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), self-help groups (SHGs) and local communities should work together to promote cleanliness, raise awareness and provide necessary support to women involved in the tourism sector. In addition, Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) can play a significant role in promoting women's participation and strengthening the sustainable development of the tourism sector in the district.

CONCLUSION:

Tourism has emerged as an important catalyst for the socio-economic empowerment of women by creating opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, skill development and financial independence. In Golaghat district, women have increasingly participated in tourism related activities where they are actively involved in managing homestays, producing handicrafts, providing food services, participating in cultural performances, promoting eco-tourism and operating small local businesses.

Women's participation in these activities has contributed to increased household income, improved living standards, enhanced self-confidence and greater involvement in community and household decision-making, although, several challenges continue to limit the full potential of women's participation in the tourism sector. Overall, the study concludes that tourism is not merely an economic activity but also an effective instrument for promoting women's empowerment and sustainable rural development. Therefore, by ensuring equal opportunities, strengthening local participation, supporting women entrepreneurs and improving institutional support, the tourism sector can make a significant contribution to achieving gender equality and inclusive development in the Golaghat district of Assam.

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