



An Exploration of Tourism Development of Meghalaya, India: What is the way forward?

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Abstract

Tourism is an important economic sector in Meghalaya, contributing 7% (approx) to the state GDP. An inquiry into the tourism development of a destination presents a valuable insight into the nature of progress and acts as a base for the way forward. Accordingly, the current study aims at exploring the tourism development of Meghalaya. It is qualitative in nature, with a focus on interviews conducted with knowledgeable personalities in the field of tourism for input. The study found that tourism development can be viewed in terms of the last 45 years with nature-based beauty as the 'unique selling proposition'. The stages are classified into inception (1980s-1990s) whereby tourism initiated from Sohra, setting-up (2000-2014) and take-off (2015-2019). The way forward requires a focus on sustainable tourism development, conservation of natural resources, promotion of community-based tourism, infrastructure development and an emphasis on service quality. Here, the role of regulation is seen as critical with the active participation of the stakeholders.

Keywords: Tourism Development, Meghalaya, Nature-Based, Sustainability, Regulation

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1. Introduction

1.1. Global tourism development: An overview

Tourism started from the western cultural experience with the elites of ancient Greece and Rome, the influence of the Renaissance and the grand tours in the 17th and 18th centuries. This continued with the seaside resorts of the 19th century and the spread of international tourism through Thomas Cook and his successors (Towner, 1995). In the early 20th century, tourism continued to expand due to increasing wealth, interest in outgoing attitudes and improvement in transport (Sezgin & Yolal, 2012). From the mid-20th century, the movement was accelerated by airplane and charter flights (Gyr, 2010; Towner, 1995; Towner & Wall, 1991). The motor car stimulated tourism from the 1930s, particularly in Europe (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007), which also saw the development of the concept of holiday camps. The 1960s witnessed the emergence of package tours as a result of the demand to travel away from the cool and variable climates of Northern Europe and North America into destinations with the pleasantness of the sun. This percolated into the golden age of mass tourism between the 1950s and 1980s (Sezgin & Yolal, 2012). In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, tourism emerged as one of the agencies of social, political, economic and cultural change at varying levels across the world (Cohen-Hattab, 2004).

The Education Bureau, Government of Hong Kong (2013) identified the industrial revolution in Europe as the base for mass tourism. Further, the technological advancements of the 19th and 20th centuries led to the invention of rapid, safe and relatively cheap forms of transport. In terms of major developments in tourism, the year 1945 can be considered as a cut-off. Before this, tourism was fragmented. The mid-1950s onwards saw the initiation of integrated tourism activities, and by the 1980s, many airlines offered complete travel services, including holiday arrangements, medical services, car hire, etc. In the 1990s, large companies influenced tourism, particularly in the United Kingdom and Europe (Lickorish & Jenkins, 1997). In relation to these developments, Thomas Cook can be described as the father of modern mass tourism. He utilized the then new railway technology

to organize inexpensive journeys for the new working class (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). His business model of short train journeys in England expanded to develop all-inclusive tours to Paris and to destinations such as India, Egypt and the Holy Land (Swinglehurst, 1982; Turner & Ash, 1975). Importantly, he was not motivated by business profits alone but by the broad social agenda which underpinned his efforts (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006).

2. Overview of India

Tourism development in India is based upon the colourful repository of natural resources, attractions, culture, religion, etc (Ministry of Tourism [GOI], 1982; Ministry of Tourism & Culture [GOI], 2002). The traditions and rich cultural heritage, magnificent monuments, natural surroundings, architectural masterpieces, music, cuisines, dance, paintings, customs and languages present India as a tourist paradise (Ministry of Tourism [GOI], 1982; Ministry of Tourism & Culture [GOI], 2002). To name a few, tourism developed during the Vedic period (1500-500 BC) through trade links between Asia and Europe, pilgrimage travel during the reign of Ashoka (269-232 BC), the passage of Marco Polo through India in the 13th century on his way back from China, etc. There was an increase in travel to India as a result of the discovery of the new sea route by Vasco Da Gama in the late 15th century. During the Mughals era (1526-1857), the emperors travelled extensively and contributed towards resort development (Bhatia, 1978; Ghosh, 1998; Nakatani, 2011).

On the above backdrop, tourism had its formal, systematic and dedicated beginning in the year 1945 through the setting of the Sargent Committee under the chairmanship of Sir John Sargent (Baken & Bhagavatula, 2010; Negi, 1998). The 1963 Jha Committee recommendations led to the establishment of Hotel Corporation, Indian Tourism and India Tourist Traffic Corporation in 1965, which were later merged into a single unit India Tourism Development Corporation (ITDC) on October 1966 (Akihito, 2017; Baken & Bhagavatula, 2010; Ministry of Tourism [GOI], 1982; Ministry of Tourism & Culture [GOI], 2002; www.shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in). The states of Kerala, Jammu and

Kashmir, Goa and Himachal Pradesh incorporated tourism into their five-year plans since the 1970s and were attracting international tourists. This turned them into India's 'model for tourism development' (Singh, 2001). In addition, the national tourism policies of 1982 (Akihito, 2017; Ministry of Tourism [GOI], 1982) and 2002 (Ministry of Tourism & Culture [GOI], 2002) provided a roadmap for tourism development through tourism circuits (Baken & Bhagavatula, 2010; Gantzer & Gantzer, 1983; Singh, 2001).

3. North-east India picture

The region of north-east India comprises of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It is a landlocked area with 98% of the borders being international, thereby making it strategically located for trade and commerce with ASEAN and SAARC nations (Ernst & Young, 2018; Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, 2011; Mohan, 2003; NITI Aayog, 2018; Sailo, 2013). The region has recognized the potential of tourism for growth and transforming livelihoods. Strategies are being formulated based upon the uniqueness of north-east India, which is characterized by the landscape in the form of hills (60%), plateau (12%) and plains (28%) along with rivers which contributes towards its natural beauty. In addition, the presence of diverse cultures and traditions makes the region a showcase of diversity (Bhattacharya, 2008; Lyngdoh, 2013; Lyngdoh & Rynjah, 2015).

In tourism development, Assam is a pioneer. It recognized tourism as an economic sector in 1958. The declaration of Kaziranga as a game reserve in 1916 and a wildlife sanctuary in 1950 projected Assam as an attractive destination for tourists. Shillong, which was the administrative headquarter of the Assam province during the British period, developed as an environment for outdoor recreation. These features led to visits by tourists to attractions like Kaziranga, Shillong and also the Kamakhya temple (Guwahati) in the 1930s. These are considered the humble beginning of modern tourism in the region (Bhattacharya, 2008). Since those days, tourism has developed extensively. The attractions are placed upon a geographical setting of hills and mountains across the eight states

with some plain areas which are primarily in Assam. North-east India is covered with lush green flora and is home to numerous fauna accompanied by streams, rivers and waterfalls (Bright, 1983; Burman, Cajee, & Laloo, 2007; Ernst & Young, 2018; Mukhopadhyay, 2020; Nandy, 2001; Raatan, 2006). This is the general image of the region.

Accordingly, this study aims at exploring the tourism development of Meghalaya in terms of its chronological progress. This acts as a valuable base for identifying the way forward for effective and sustainable tourism.

4. Theoretical background

Butler (1980) used the product cycle concept (where sales proceeds slowly at first, experience a rapid rate of growth, stabilize and subsequently decline) to establish the tourism area cycle of evolution. It is characterized by stages of exploration (visits by a small number of tourists), involvement (as tourists increase, local residents begin to provide facilities), development (depicting a well-defined tourist market area), consolidation (where a major part of an area's economy is tied to tourism), stagnation (capacity levels being reached or exceeded with environmental, social and economic problems) and decline/rejuvenation (unable to compete with new attractions/tapping of new tourism resources). As an outcome, the tourism area life cycle (TALC) framework has formed the basis for assessing the development of destinations worldwide (Bojanic, 2005; Fossen & Lafferty, 1998; Getz, 1992; Szromek, 2019; Zhong, Deng, & Xiang, 2008). An underlying feature of TALC is its factoring of socio-economic and environmental impacts, sustainable management and capacity, thereby making it a holistic assessment of tourism progress. Subsequently, the TALC framework is considered in the exploration of tourism development of Meghalaya in an effort to classify its appropriate stage.

5. Methodology

The study is exploratory in scope. It is qualitative in nature, covering both primary and secondary data. The observations from

the tourism attractions/spots of Meghalaya combined with the secondary print and electronic sources such as reports, research articles, magazine columns, etc, acted as the starting point of the study. In addition, interviews conducted with knowledgeable personalities in the field of tourism and tourism service providers shaped the chronological progress of the tourism development of Meghalaya (Baken & Bhagavatula, 2010; Burman, Cajee, & Laloo, 2007; Cohen-Hattab, 2004; Lyngdoh, 2013). This is supplemented with a content analysis of the interviews combined with data on tourist arrivals, employment, and revenue gathered from various sources. The inputs explored formed the basis for identifying the stages of tourism development ranging from its inception in the 1980s to date. Further, the TALC framework was applied to classify the life cycle status of Meghalaya tourism (Bojanic, 2005; Butler, 1980; Fossen & Lafferty, 1998; Zhong, Deng, & Xiang, 2008). The result is the analysis of the way forward in terms of future sustainable tourism development and the highlighting of stakeholder roles and key strategies.

6. Tourism development of Meghalaya

Meghalaya covers an area of 22429 sq. km with a population of around 36.9 lakh. Assam borders it in the northwest, north and east, and Bangladesh in the south and southwest. It falls in the eastern part of the Indian Himalayan Region and is characterized by rich flora and fauna, hills and mountains, rolling grasslands and forests, rivers and valleys, deep gorges, slopes and plains. These physical features represent a nature-based aesthetic value of Meghalaya, which forms its tourism 'unique selling proposition' apart from its culture, cuisine, adventure, wildlife, etc. It is also renowned for its 'living root bridges', a natural bridgemade of the buttress roots of wild rubber trees that have been preserved for centuries (Burman et al., 2007). Tourism has the potential to contribute to the socio-economic development of Meghalaya. The key is in strategizing a dynamic blueprint. The starting point is the exploration of tourism development. This also forms a basis of future tourism 'plan of action'.

Sohra(also known as Cherrapunji) can be considered as being synonymous with the tourism development of Meghalaya. Its

history in tourism can be traced to the 1830s when it was a sanitarium under the British period in India (May, 2012). Shillong also hosted tourists as a result of having a fairly active private hotel industry (National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, 2013). Its history as the capital of undivided Assam also played a role in making it a popular destination. As an outcome of these nascent developments, tourism in Meghalaya has developed over a period of 45 years since the 1970s. This can be categorized as the critical era of tourism development. It is classified into three stages, namely, inception, setting-up and take-off. In its journey, tourism has become the main source of income and livelihood for the stakeholders.

6.1. Stage I – The inception (the 1980s-1990s)

The tourism development of Meghalaya can be traced to Sohra during the 1980s-90s (in the 1970s there were negligible visits). People visited the place to experience the famous Sohra rains. It would rain unabated for months together, combined with fog and mist. This was what people came to see and experience. During those days, people visited Sohra, not because of its natural beauty, but rather for the rains. The visitors included both Indian and foreign nationals. At this stage, the host community (Sohra) was happy to welcome visitors.

According to Mr. Alan West Kharkongor (President, Meghalaya Rural Tourism Forum), 'Tourism as a source of livelihood was never in the thoughts of the host. The host community was hospitable and welcoming towards visitors and money returns was never a concern'.

During this time, Sohra also started to develop as a famous picnic spot for the populace of Shillong city. An important element in this tourism development is the nature-based beauty epitomized by hills, mountains, valleys, rivers, waterfalls, flora and fauna, etc. This 'nature-based scenic beauty' became the starting point of Meghalaya's 'unique selling proposition' in tourism. It is a source of rejuvenation and well-being for the tourist.

6.2. Stage II - Setting-up (2000-2014)

At the turn of the millennium, tourism started expanding to other parts of Meghalaya. It was the start of profitable tourism with a sense of professionalism. In the early 2000s, the hotels in Shillong started to have tourists at an increased frequency. The tourist made Shillong the hub for travelling to various other attractions. The Directorate of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya, played a leading role in these developments through advertising and marketing initiatives. The years 2000-2012 primarily saw domestic tourists from Assam and West Bengal. They were the main clientele. The motive for travel was pleasant weather and nature-based beauty. That being said, the tourist attractions on offer were limited and mainly confined to Shillong and Sohra. In Shillong, the popular attractions were Shillong Peak, Golf Links, Elephant Falls, etc. The main feature is that Shillong was the hub, and Sohra was the major destination of visit.

Amidst these developments, a turning point in tourism development was the year 2003-2004. The first six-room resort was set up at Laitkynsew village, which is 14 kilometres down the road from Sohra. This initiation was significant in terms of laying a pathway for others to follow. The event gradually resulted in the setting up of the government-owned Polo Orchid Resort at Sohra, followed by various others. They got tourist, but their numbers those days was less. As a result, the population of Sohra at large lacked the confidence to venture into tourism activities. Nonetheless, this was a watershed moment in tourism development as before this the tourist accommodations were managed at government properties such as circuit houses, inspection bungalows, etc and hotels of Shillong city. In tourism, accommodation is important, and the setting up of these resorts/hotels was a major push towards the development of tourism.

The year 2003-2004 also saw the emergence of Mawlynnong in the tourism scene of Meghalaya. It is a small village located around 80 km from Shillong near the Indo-Bangladesh border. It has a history of attributes such as beauty, artistic presentations, cleanliness, hygiene and aesthetics. These practices resulted in the village being recognized globally in the year 2003 when it was declared as 'Asia's

cleanest village' by Discover India Magazine. This event resulted in an increased flow of tourists. In due course of time, businesses enterprises such as bed and breakfasts, homestays, resorts, cafes, restaurants, retail stores, souvenir outlets, etc. were established by the locals. This became a means for infrastructure development in terms of the construction of footpaths, streets, roads, electricity, community halls, etc.

In this stage, Sohra, Mawlynnong and, to some extent, Shillong were at the centre of tourism development. The tourist will always visit Sohra in the majority of cases. Till today, it acts as the major motivation for travel to Meghalaya. During this time, Sohra saw the establishment of tourism enterprises such as food and beverages and accommodations by tourism enthusiasts. However, it must be noted that the development of Mawlynnong acted as a boon to tourism. In addition, this stage witnessed another important development. It was the start of Shnongpdeng village as an adventure tourism attraction in the year 2013-2014. It resulted in the increased flow of domestic tourists from many parts of India and foreigners alike. This is a significant development as it marks the advent of adventure tourism in Meghalaya. Shnongpdeng is located along the river Umngot in West Jaintia Hills, offering activities such as kayaking, boating, cliff jumping, snorkelling, zip-lining, scuba diving, trekking, etc. A popular activity in Shnongpdeng is camping. Similar to Mawlynnong, Shnongpdeng is also built upon the community-based tourism model. Tourism led to the initiation of businesses such as homestays, cafes, restaurants, retail stores, souvenir outlets, etc. Importantly, tourism encourages professionalism in the community with increased attention to sustainable tourism practices.

6.3. Stage III – Take-off (2015-2019)

The earlier stages laid the platform, and stage III is classified as a take-off in tourism development covering the years 2015-2019.

According to Mr. Philip F. Tariang (Assistant Director, Tourism Department; Government of Meghalaya), 'This was a period of comprehensive growth and development in tourism epitomized by the spread of activities and enterprises into many new areas'.

Tourism expanded beyond Sohra, Shillong and Mawlynnong into other pockets of nature-based features such as Mawphanlur, Mawthadraishan, Sohbar, etc. Shnongpdeng became extensively popular in the tourism market. Overall, it resulted in the initiation and growth of tourism entrepreneurship in Meghalaya. These are in the form of micro and small enterprises offering services such as food and beverages, accommodation, transportation, recreation, adventure, entertainment, etc. It was an era of confidence for the grassroots to get involved in tourism activities. The margins were as high as 35-40% (Lyngdoh & Rynjah, 2015). This became a prime motivator and a source of confidence for the host communities to invest in tourism, even though it might involve a loan amount for the start-up.

In Sohra and adjoining areas, the year 2015 saw a sudden growth in tourism accommodations. These were mainly in the form of homestays and bed and breakfast with offerings of local, Chinese and Indian menus. A number of outlets relating to food and beverages, souvenirs and handicrafts, wayside tourist shops, etc also started. Hotels and resorts occupied the Sohra tourism scene. According to the Directorate of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya, there were 182 tourism accommodations in Sohra alone in the year 2019. As a result, Sohra became the tourism hub of Meghalaya, attracting all types of visitors from India and abroad, such as budget travellers to leisure tourists and high-end tourist. The take-off stage also saw the initiation of new tourism circuits. A popular circuit covering a major part of Jaintia Hills is Mawlynnong-Dawki-Shnongpdeng-Darrang-Amlarem-Jowai. In West Khasi Hills, an emerging circuit is Mawphanlur-Mawthadraishan-Nongknum. These circuits offer mesmerizing nature-based scenic beauty along with numerous adventure tourism activities.

Mr. Alan West Kharkongor attributed the take-off stage to two main causes stating, 'Firstly, the four-lane road between Shillong and Guwahati reduced travel time significantly and made the journey comfortable. Secondly, social media played an enormous role in the advertising and marketing of Meghalaya. The pictures and videos being shared reached a wide clientele thereby motivating travel'.

The other causes are the increase in tourism services coupled with an improvement in service quality. The nature-based features present as a means for recreation, rejuvenation and well-being for the tourist. Meghalaya is a way out from the busy and bustling schedules of life and a leap into the lap of nature. As an outcome, the source markets have expanded beyond Assam and West Bengal. Today, Meghalaya is a sought out destination in South India. The tourist looks to the attractions for a learning experience. Simultaneously, the host communities are strategizing toward tourism success. The driving force of this success is the services and service quality being offered by micro and small enterprises.

Although tourism development of Meghalaya is largely seen from the prism of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills region, the years 2017 onwards saw the initiation of tourism in Garo Hills, which is a mixture of hills and plain areas with its rich culture and wildlife as the 'unique selling proposition'. In recent years, Garo Hills has overcome its safety and security concerns and turned towards tourism as one of the sources of livelihood. The Garos are a hospitable people, and culture is the main form of tourism. Its biggest advantage is its wildlife, as seen in Nokrek National Park and Balpakram National Park. The Simsang River and Siju Cave also stand out as tourist attractions. This is the main pull factor, particularly for foreign tourists. That being said, the Government of Meghalaya has to put special impetus and efforts into the promotion and development of tourism in the Garo Hills.

As a representation of tourism development, Table 1 depicts the number of domestic tourist arrivals (DTA) and foreign tourist arrivals (FTA) over a period of two decades (2001-2020). On average, the total arrival is 6.12 lakh tourists per annum. The majority comprises of DTA with FTA being a meager 8000 tourists per annum. However, the linear growth rate of both DTA and FTA is a healthy one. As per estimates for the year 2019, tourism accommodations comprising of homestays, guest houses, resorts and hotels had a revenue generation of ` 195 crores. According to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (2022) tourism employment in Meghalaya in 2010 was 1.69 lakh. Today, the direct and indirect employment is estimated at approximately 3

lakh (8% of a total population of 36.9 lakh). This shows that Meghalaya is a popular tourist destination that has expanded in recent years. As an outcome of tourist arrivals, there has been an increased employment generation and poverty alleviation, particularly before the covid-19 pandemic. Although tourism is a specialized sector, it has scope to absorb even the semi-skilled and unskilled workforce into its numerous activities and enterprises such as retail, small cafes and restaurants, accommodation services, roadside shops, etc. These employment opportunities contribute toward poverty alleviation. In Meghalaya, the village communities play an important role in tourism. Such an involvement enables the villages to come out of poverty through the economic returns generated from tourism activities. It also improves the social status of the tourism stakeholders.

Table 1: Domestic tourist arrivals and foreign tourist arrivals in Meghalaya

(Numbers in Lakh)

Year	DTA	FTA	Total	Year	DTA	FTA	Total
2001	1.79	0.02	1.81	2012	6.80	0.05	6.85
2002	2.69	0.03	2.72	2013	6.91	0.07	6.98
2003	3.72	0.06	3.78	2014	7.18	0.09	7.27
2004	4.33	0.12	4.45	2015	7.51	0.08	7.59
2005	3.76	0.05	3.81	2016	8.31	0.08	8.39
2006	4.00	0.04	4.04	2017	9.91	0.12	10.03
2007	4.58	0.05	4.63	2018	11.98	0.18	12.16
2008	5.50	0.05	5.55	2019	12.46	0.26	12.72
2009	5.91	0.05	5.96	2020	0.24	0.02	0.26
2010	6.53	0.04	6.57	Average	6.04	0.08	6.12
2011	6.68	0.05	6.73	LGR (%)	5.51	6.76	5.53

(Directorate of Tourism [Government of Meghalaya], 2022)

The take-off stage has worked well for Meghalaya. However, the spread of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, which is responsible for the covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of the year 2020, stalled the progress. The covid-19 pandemic happened at a time when the tourism season was about to commence. Tourism was the most affected sector because the restrictions on tourism activities were the last to be lifted. The other economic activities were gradually opened from September 2020, whereas tourism was effectively allowed only from February 2021. The lockdown/restrictions resulted in hardship for the tourism stakeholders, particularly the ones at the grassroots like micro and small enterprises such as cafes, souvenir outlets, homestays, bed and breakfasts, etc. Further, the restrictions/lockdown was re-imposed in April 2021 because of the second covid-19 wave. Such restrictions were lifted again only in September 2021. However, it is expected that it will take till the year 2023-2024 for the tourism economy to return to the pre-pandemic levels. There is a long way to go. Nonetheless, Meghalaya can return effectively to its tourism vibrancy on the back of its tourism development that has been achieved thus far. The brand image and tourist loyalty can enormously contribute towards the continuation of tourism development.

6.4. Content Analysis and Summing-up

The main contents that portray tourism development are elements such as 'source of livelihood for the stakeholders and the communities, nature-based beauty of the destination as a unique selling proposition, the signature attractions such as Sohra, Mawlynnong and Shnongpdeng, the growth of tourism entrepreneurship, the positive role of social media in advertising and marketing and the shocks of the covid-19 pandemic'. These elements define the tourism sector of Meghalaya. In addition, the three stages are summed-up in Table 2. It presents a quick and comprehensive view of tourism development while factoring in the TALC framework. From a nascent start (stage I), tourism in Meghalaya has progressed significantly. It has impacts on the livelihoods and the development of the stakeholders as a whole.

Table 2: Summary of Tourism Development of Meghalaya

Stage	Tourism development	TALC classification
I	The start is traced to Sohra; the visitors visited to experience the famous Sohra rains; the host community hospitably welcomed the tourist	Exploration
II	Tourism spread from Sohra to other parts of Meghalaya; Shillong became a tourism hub; Mawlynnong and Shnongpdeng became prominent on the tourism map; the major tourist clientele was from Assam and West Bengal	Involvement
III	Tourism became an important economic sector in Meghalaya; its presence is seen in many pockets; the Garo Hills region started to come up on the tourism map; there is growth in tourism entrepreneurship; new tourism circuits came up in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills; covid-19 pandemic hampered tourism; post-September, 2021 tourism has started to pick up again	Development

The tourism development of Meghalaya is based on the platform of nature-based beauty and pleasant weather. Alternative forms of tourism like wildlife, culture, cuisine, cave, health and wellness, etc. has also developed. However, nature-based tourism still dominates. Meghalaya is located in the Indian Himalayan Region. Such a location is advantageous but not without its challenges. Nature-based scenic beauty is an outcome of climate characteristics. Hence, tourism in Meghalaya is predominantly climate-based. It has flourished out of 'climate events' such as rains, fog, mist, etc. that contribute to the aesthetics of the place. It can be stated that

without the monsoons, tourism in Meghalaya may be non-existent. It is on this backdrop that climate change is a concern. In recent years, the local communities have been focusing on responsible and sustainable tourism. The progress to this end is encouraging, but a lot remains to be done for meaningful impacts.

7. The Way Forward

The tourism of Meghalaya is shaped by its geographical location, which gives its nature-based beauty. Being a climate-based tourism destination, its attractiveness is an outcome of 'climatic events' such as the monsoon during the months of May till October. This period also forms the peak tourism season. Accordingly, an assessment of the way forward in terms of tourism development strategies is much needed. The main concern is the sustainability of tourism. It is critical for Meghalaya as nature, environment, and climate are the platforms upon which tourism is built. Developing tourism on the back of nature-based strengths is fast and easy. Natural riches are readily available for use. However, this model of tourism development comes with challenges. At foremost is the challenge of conserving nature and using it in a sustainable manner. In the different stages of tourism development, the need to conserve nature was not given much prominence. The landscape and natural setting have been reshaped to accommodate structures such as homestays, lodges, guest houses, hotels, resorts, etc. Although these structures are indispensable, the concern is the nature of construction without environmental checks.

Conserving is closely related to sustainability. Without giving importance to conservation, the natural resources that form tourism will continue to be exploited and used without regard for maintaining such resources for future generations. This is where the concept of sustainability is defeated. As such, it can be said that the tourism development of Meghalaya lacks an impetus on sustainability till date. On this backdrop, the challenge of reclamation of nature is a distant idea. There are many areas wherein the natural resources need reclamation. This is mainly in the coal mining, limestone and stone quarrying belts. The reclamation efforts will supplement well for tourism development.

However, any reclamation effort takes 20 to 30 years. This poses a question on the willpower of tourism stakeholders for reclamation initiatives.

In relation to the above, tourism in Meghalaya needs new and dynamic strategies. The start is to devise a new and sustainable model of tourism development. A larger emphasis on alternative forms of tourism can bring about more balanced progress. This will also contribute to controlling the inflow of tourists and dealing with carrying capacity. The stakeholders, from the government to the grassroots, must be made partners in the drive towards sustainability. Awareness programs can provide the necessary impetus and set efforts in the right direction. The model must be based on the strength and opportunities while mitigating the weaknesses and threats. For Meghalaya tourism, the strengths include nature, pleasant weather, hospitable people, culture and wellness, while tapping the wide domestic and international tourist markets present an opportunity. On the other hand, an untrained workforce, poor organization of tourism, and improper waste management is the weaknesses, whereas new and upcoming nature-based tourism destination in India and abroad is the threats.

A larger involvement of the community and the promotion of community-based tourism can result in a better spread of benefits from tourism. The villages of Meghalaya have a strong culture of community cohesiveness and cooperation. It is a win-win situation for all. Infrastructure is another important element in tourism development. It needs improvement so as to enhance connectivity and accessibility to the attractions. Public-private partnerships can play a proactive role. Similarly, there is scope for improvement in the range, depth and quality of tourism services. The training of the stakeholders combined with an assessment of the needs and demands of the tourist can redress the service quality problems. A focus on these aspects will result in more inclusive and robust tourism with greater contributions to the state GDP. This has the opportunity to reinvent and reengineer tourism development in terms of a better, richer and fulfilled tourism experience for the tourist and the host communities.

An important intervention for tourism development is regulation. It will provide the required checks and balances on tourism

activities while focusing upon a trained workforce and better service quality. Regulation will streamline important aspects such as waste management. It can also devise standard codes for the construction of accommodation properties such as hotels, resorts, homestays, etc. This will ensure that the landscape is not defaced. Tourism in Meghalaya is driven by micro and small enterprises. They engage a lot of semi-skilled and unskilled workforce. This is a uniqueness of tourism whereby although it is a specialized activity, the employment can be casual. This has both good and bad points. The good point is the opportunities for livelihood for the grassroots; the bad point is the dilution in service quality. This is where regulation can play a transformative role through capacity building. It can make the tourism experience better for the tourist. In return, it can give a better livelihood to the stakeholders. Regulation can also keep a tab on the carrying capacity of an attraction. These interventions will add value to the destination. It would also help in the record-keeping of the tourism enterprises. This will help in situations such as pandemics with regards to planning a relief/stimulus package. The government will have a database of tourism enterprises that bodes well for decision-making. Consequently, the way forward (Table 3) requires a dedicated effort from all the stakeholders while focusing on their respective strategies.

Table 3: The Way Forward – Stakeholders and Strategies

Government	Tourism organizations	Community / people	Tourism enterprises	The tourist	Academia
Lay a path for tourism progress through guidelines and actions on sustainable practices in tourist attractions	Learn about the ground situation of tourism and tourism stakeholders by being deeply involved with them	Cooperation and collaboration in the community for shared involvement in tourism with a long-term perspective	Understand the importance of service quality and service delivery and use it for providing impeccable tourism services	At every attraction a learning space for the tourist through pictures and billboards to inform on the efforts towards sustainability and that they are	Teach the future participants and stakeholders on the best practices in tourism by focusing on conserving and
Play the	Focus on sustainable	Transparen			

<p>role of a regulator and monitor tourism development</p> <p>Lay down financial allocations and schemes for tourism infrastructure development (both physical and soft skills)</p>	<p>e tourism practices by creating awareness to the community and training to stakeholders</p> <p>Assist the grassroots to apply for and use the government schemes for start-up and/or expansion of their tourism enterprises</p>	<p>cy and information sharing on the management of tourism and the recording of financial transactions with the sharing of gains out of tourism activities equitably</p> <p>Continuous application of cost-benefit analysis before undertaking any new tourism intervention</p>	<p>Focus on continuous learning and training and development and consider it as a never ending process towards achieving perfection</p> <p>Analyze the needs and wants of the tourist across their demographics, income, taste, etc and accordingly design product and services</p>	<p>partners on the effort</p> <p>Encourage the tourist on being responsible and kind towards nature</p> <p>Take feedback from the learned tourist on how to manage and sustain the attractions better</p>	<p>reclamation of nature</p> <p>Engage in continuous research on the elements of tourism development through a holistic focus on the sector</p> <p>Engage in extension of tourism knowledge by continuously involving with the grassroots</p>
<p>←The strategies of the stakeholders are interrelated and supplementary →</p>					

8. Conclusion

The tourism development of Meghalaya can primarily be summed up in terms of the last 45 years. It comprises of stage I classified as the inception (1980s-1990s), whereby tourism evolved from Sohra because of the climatic events such as rain, fog and mist. Stage II characterized as setting-up (2000-2014), saw the emergence of tourism from Sohra into other pockets such as Mawlynnong and Shnongpdeng. The concurrent one is stage III termed as the take-off (2015-2019), epitomized by the sudden growth and progression of

tourism. In relation, the Meghalaya Tourism Policy, 2011 and Tourism Development and Investment Promotion Scheme, 2012 are playing their significant roles in propelling tourism development.

The above stages are taken as exploration, involvement and development, respectively. As such, tourism in Meghalaya is currently at the third stage as per the TALC framework. That being said, the covid-19 pandemic from early 2020 till the present has hampered the growth of tourism. However, tourism activities are picking up again gradually. Tourism development has depicted the central role of nature-based beauty as the unique selling point. Importantly, this is supplemented by the development of alternative forms of tourism in recent years.

Contemporarily, sustainable tourism development is an area of concern. This has brought into focus the conservation of natural resources. In its absence, the natural resources will continue to be exploited and used without regard for future generations. As such, the formulation of a sustainable tourism development model is a must. In this effort, the stakeholders are to be included so that the benefits can reach across the spectrum from big enterprises to the grassroots. The promotion of community-based tourism can be continued so as to leverage community cohesiveness. This would also involve the development of appropriate infrastructure such as roads, bridges, communication, etc., along with a focus on service quality of tourism services. Collectively, tourism regulation can be considered a viable way forward. It will result in required checks on tourism activities while also focusing on a trained tourism workforce. To this end, the reinvention of tourism development in Meghalaya requires a dedicated effort from all the stakeholders. In the failure to do so, the potential of tourism to contribute to economic growth will be difficult to realize.

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