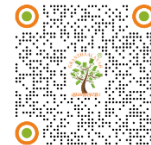Original Article

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AS A DRIVER OF INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: A STUDY ALIGNED WITH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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ABSTRACT

North-East India is bestowed with rich natural and cultural resources but remains characterized by intra-regional socio-economic disparities. For this region, sustainable tourism, including ecotourism and community-based cultural tourism, has been considered as a high-potential strategy for stimulating inclusive growth, preserving heritage, and empowering local communities. This paper indicates how sustainable tourism development in the North-Eastern Region can contribute to reducing regional, income, and social inequalities in tune with the SDGs, specially Goals 8 (Decent Work and Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequality), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 13 (Climate Action). The literature indicates that ecoand cultural tourism are able to generate employment and income in remote areas, uplift tribal and agrarian communities, and finance conservation-all of which are supportive of the SDG targets. Community-based models ensure that economic benefits accrue to the local people and that cultural and ecological integrity are maintained. However, gaps in infrastructure-cutting across roads and air connectivity-coordination issues among states, and deficiencies in policy thwart the full potential of tourism. We have also found that an integrated strategy is required for strengthening public–private partnerships, training local entrepreneurs, and promoting policies on sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism in the North-East, when aligned with SDG priorities, can be a strong lever for "leaving no one behind" through decent jobs, supporting women and youth, and protecting the environment.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Ecotourism, North-East India, SDGS, Community Participation, Regional Development.

INTRODUCTION

The eight states of North-East India form a geographically remote but culturally vibrant region at India's eastern frontier. This area boasts of spectacular natural beauty and biodiversity-from Himalayas and dense rainforests to unique wildlife and river valleys and a tapestry of more than 200 indigenous communities and ethnic groups with rich traditions. These assets have earned the region global recognition as an ecotourism hotspot. At the same time, the NER has traditionally lagged behind in conventional development indicators. It faces intra-regional developmental disparities with low per-capita incomes, weak infrastructure, and sectors such as agriculture and handicrafts that are unable to absorb the labor force. Growth has been traditionally hampered by insurgency, social tension, and market isolation. Consequently, persistent inequalities persist between NER's hill and valley districts, urban hubs and rural areas, and various social groups. According to the NITI Aayog District SDG Index 2023-24, despite progress, Goal 10 or Reduced Inequality continues to show marked disparities across districts in the North-East. Tourism thus appears as a lever with promising potential. The region's cultural festivals, handicrafts, wildlife sanctuaries, and adventure sites already attract visitors. When

developed sustainably, tourism can diversify the economy, create jobs, especially for youth and women, and channel income to local communities. Importantly, sustainable tourism is also explicitly referred to in the 2030 Agenda, and will promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products. Tourism initiatives for ecological protection and community welfare go along with the following SDGs: SDG 12 - Sustainable Consumption - due to the encouragement of the conservation of forests and biodiversity, and SDG 13 - Climate Action. In view of North-East's unique assets and deficits, aligning tourism growth with SDG frameworks offers a pathway to ensure that no one is left behind in regional development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Burman et al. (2007) look at the scope for cultural and eco-tourism in North-East India using a community-based approach. They showed that ecotourism and cultural tourism go hand in hand for the recognization of indigenous culture and also bring economic opportunities for the local communities. Their work highlighted community-based tourism as one inclusive model that is benefial as well as sustainably conserve the fragile ecosystems. They pointed out the need for local people's involvement in decision-making and planning if they want to make tourism truly sustainable in this region.

Singha and Verma (2009) in their paper Ecotourism in North-East India: A Sustainable Development Approach defined ecotourism as a balance between the needs of tourists and ecology, and also the livelihood needs of the local people of the region. From the findings of the study, it was observed that ecotourism has very much the potential to empower the local community, especially the women, through income-generation opportunities and concurrently contribute to biodiversity conservation. The paper highlighted that ethnic diversity and dependence on natural resources in this region makes ecotourism very important for the creation of sustainable livelihoods.

Medhi et al. (2020) discussed the present scenario of ecotourism in North-East India and described ecotourism as a form of responsible tourism which maintains ecology and improves the well-being of the local people. He mentioned that due to its location in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, which gives it more than 66% forest cover, there is enormous scope for ecotourism in the region. Medhi highlighted the potential of ecotourism in the conservation of biodiversity and protection of the environment, besides generating employment in underdeveloped districts, but he also warned that ecotourism might be damaging due to mass tourism if there is failure in regulation.

Bhutia et al. (2020) examined the region's sustainable tourism for North-East India's development. He observed that sustainable tourism acts as a socio-economic growth catalyst and highlighted determinants in local entrepreneurship, infrastructure development, and community participation. Bhutia noted that tourism requires many agencies to come into play for its development, including roads, culture, and forest departments, among others. The study suggested for improvements in infrastructure, administrative support, and improvement in the public image of the region so as to reap the full potential for regional development.

The study conducted by Haolai et al. (2022) dealt with the problems and prospects of tourism in North-East India. He mentioned that though the region is rich in natural and cultural resources, due to insurgency, political instability, corruption, and poor infrastructure, the region remains backward economically. He noted that tourism might raise per capita income and thereby give a boost to living standards through generating employment and improvement of infrastructure. However, transportation bottlenecks and socio-political instability were identified as major barriers in the way of sustainable tourism growth.

Chaudhury et al. (2023) have looked at eco-tourism from a sustainability perspective in the North-Eastern states. Indeed, their analysis has insisted that natural landscapes of the region, wildlife sanctuaries, and cultural traditions provide bases on which eco-tourism can be developed. In this light, they have argued that sustainable eco-tourism would have positive impacts, both on visitors and locals through opportunities for jobs and reduction in poverty besides increased environmental awareness. However, accessibility, security, hygiene, and poor tourist facilities remain some of the obstacles that need to be addressed if the sector is to develop well.

Baishya et al. (2024) in the study concentrated on the potentials of eco-tourism in Assam concerning generating employment. It focused on how tourism is a labour-intensive industry and to what degree it can absorb unemployed youth in fields like hospitality, guiding, handicrafts, and transport. Simultaneously, Baishya also mentioned the structural problems such as poor publicity, absence of concerted effort at promoting tourism within North-East states, and no market segmentation. The author also recommended strategic planning and more government intervention towards the realization of full potential in generating employment through eco-tourism.

Tushika et al. (2025) researched the cultural tourism of Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur and identified some of the major tourist attractions as cultural festivals, tribal traditions, crafts, and performing arts. It logically follows that tourists are very interested in participatory cultural experiences in which immersion occurs; hence, economic opportunities are being given to the local community. Cultural tourism offers an alternative route toward sustainable development that meets economic growth along with the assurance of conservation of cultural heritage and regional identity. To this fact, he mentioned that strengthening festival tourism, craft-based tourism, and ensuring community participation in tourism planning should be undertaken.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
1) To examine the role of tourism and sustainability in generating decent employment, promoting social inclusion, empowering women and indigenous communities in North-East India.
2) To analyze the environmental benefits of eco-tourism and identifying the challenges affecting the development of sustainable tourism in the region.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is qualitative and exploratory in nature and based on secondary data sources. This paper helps in understanding the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions of tourism by reviewing literature from reputed journals. The SDG reports offered district-level performance, and the data was drawn by comparing from the Niti Ayog report NITI Aayog. (2021) and NITI Aayog, and Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region. (2025). Official reports and documents from the Ministry of Tourism, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Meghalaya Tourism, and Press Information Bureau (PIB) also formed a basis for the analysis. Using thematic analysis, the sources were examined under four themes: community participation, economic outcomes, environmental conservation, and infrastructural challenges.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the reviewed studies point out the potential of tourism to generate employment and alleviate poverty in North-East India. Being an inherently "labour-intensive" sector, tourism generates on-site employment in hotels, guides, and transport, as well as indirect employment in support sectors such as crafts, construction, and agriculture. Baishya et al. (2024) reports that nature-based tourism could employ thousands of local youths and artisans in Assam. Similarly, Medhi et al. (2020) points out that eco-tourism ensures proper utilization of natural resource to benefit the local people and links income directly to conservation. Synthesis of the literature confirms that core outcomes of the promotion of sustainable tourism are "economic growth, cultural preservation, and regional identity" Baishya et al. (2024), Bhutia et al. (2020), Tushika et al. (2025). These economic opportunities contribute towards SDG 8 on "decent work for all" and the formalization of MSMEs. Many of the North-East initiatives reflect this in practice, for example, the Tourist Buddy Scheme of Meghalaya, which trains local youth as guides, creating jobs while improving visitor experience.

Critically, tourism-driven growth in backward areas serves to narrow regional income gaps, thereby addressing SDG 10. When villages and tribal hamlets gain from tourism, they tend to catch up with more developed districts. Chaudhury et al. (2023) emphasize that ecotourism generates revenues for local community development and creates employment opportunities for people to combat poverty and unemployment. In effect, remote livelihoods are diversified beyond subsistence agriculture. In addition, tourism revenue has often reached poor sections of the population. For example, women in tribal communities may operate homestays or sell handicrafts to tourists-opportunities which raise family incomes and female empowerment, hence also contributing to SDG 5. Singha and Verma (2009) explicitly note ecotourism's role in advancing "a better status for women" through new avenues of income, and such social impacts resonate with the broader goals of inclusivity encompassed in SDG 8.

However, large inequalities persist. The NITI Aayog District SDG Index shows that many NER districts score poorly along basic dimensions of inequality, including education, employment, and health. Tourism can ameliorate some disparities, but the literature cautions that without deliberate policy, tourism may even widen gaps. Popular destinations, for instance, may attract external investment-hotel ownership by outside corporations-unless community participation is mandated. To sum, sustainable tourism has demonstrable potential to uplift incomes and reduce rural inequality in NER, so long as local communities remain at the front and center.

A recurring finding is that community-based tourism models yield the greatest equity benefits. Burman et al. (2007) define community-based tourism as one that "positively links conservation with economic development" and ensures locals "receive just benefits from tourism activities". This model is documented well in the North-East: village homestays in Arunachal or Sikkim, community-guided treks in Meghalaya, and tribal cultural tours in Assam have all spread tourism revenue far and wide. When villagers manage the tourism enterprise, they keep profits locally and make decisions which respect cultural norms. Bhutia et al. (2020) stresses that "the importance of local community participation for ensuring sustainable tourism development" cannot be overestimated. Indeed, he finds that sustainable tourism success hinges on engaging many local agencies (forest, culture, roads) and improving infrastructure to support community enterprises. Chaudhury et al. (2023) note that "local people benefit without affecting their culture and customs", meaning tourism can reinforce community identity rather than erode it. Examples include the promotion of tribal festivals-e.g., Hornbill Festival in Nagaland-which both attract tourists and revitalize traditions. By highlighting tribal heritage as an asset, tourism helps integrate marginalized groups into the broader economy on their own terms and thus reduces social inequality. In this respect, tourism aligns with the aim of SDG 10 to reduce all forms of discrimination.

The sustainable tourism that is articulated in the North-East shows a clear linkage of economic benefit with environmental stewardship. As several authors note, ecotourism should be "nature-based tourism that is managed to be ecologically sustainable". This, by definition, means that revenue from tourism is actively used to conserve habitats and promote conservation education. Chaudhury et al. (2023) have documented many benefits: ecotourism "increases environmental awareness boosts the rural economy" and "encourage enterprises for the conservation of nature". This component of community awareness is key in the Northeast, where so many communities live in or alongside forested areas. For example, guided tours of wildlife in Assam's Kaziranga provide funds for park management; on the other hand, eco-treks in Mizoram themselves educate villagers on the value of protecting biodiversity.

These links are further reinforced by the SDG framework. SDG 12 calls for sustainable consumption and points toward specific challenges in Northeast India: the 2023 report finds "Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) still show marked disparities across districts" NITI Aayog, and Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region. (2025), such as high levels of jhum (shifting) cultivation which degrade forest cover. Sustainable tourism can counteract this by offering alternative livelihoods that do not rely on forest clearing. SDG 13 (Climate Action) explicitly includes forest and watershed indicators. A healthy forest ecosystem-maintained through eco-tourism-contributes to climate resilience, in tune with SDG 13 targets. Another point worth noting is that some forms of tourism need to be carefully managed lest they harm the very areas they are visiting. Several authors caution that if tourism is not "properly monitored it can be as damaging as mass tourism" Medhi et al. (2020). Unchecked tourist traffic can result in pollution, wildlife disturbance, or cultural commodification. Hence, most literature advocates for guidelines and limits-including capping visitor numbers at fragile sites and promoting eco-friendly accommodations-to keep tourism within sustainable bounds.

Haolai et al. (2022) succinctly puts this as a "transportation bottleneck" that inhibits development. While there have been recent projects, such as the Sela Tunnel and new airports, many attractions remain inaccessible and costly to travel to. Bad roads and unreliable transportation thwart tourists' plans and burdensome for locals in general. Similarly, past security incidents have managed to create a perception of risk. Though much improved, continued military or police checks and permit hassles, especially in Arunachal and Nagaland, still discourage visitors. Baishya et al. (2024) also points to the lack of a unified tourism council among the North-East states. Each state tends to handle tourism promotion on its own, without trying to make multi-state circuits or joint marketing. This makes tourists have to negotiate different rules and promotions every state they visit. The very need for coordination in planning, for instance, a North-East tourism board, is suggested time and again by scholars themselves as the remedy. Policy alignment is also necessary. Bhutia et al. (2020) finds that unless many agencies act-roads, culture, forest, police for security, and so on-tourism cannot succeed. If these are not in alignment, then tourism cannot develop holistically. Similarly, training and financing are required to build local entrepreneurship. support, so tourism policy must include credit to local businesses, skill development in hospitality, and education in sustainable practices. In summary, while the North-East's potential in tourism is widely acknowledged, unlocking it requires overcoming infrastructure deficits, administrative silos, and capacity constraints. The literature suggests that without these improvements, inequalities may persist even as tourist arrivals grow.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable tourism will help in bridging inequalities in North-East India by generating local incomes, creating decent jobs, and promoting community welfare. Our review of literature and SDG data shows clear evidence that eco and cultural tourism can advance SDG 8 (through entrepreneurship and decent work) and SDG 10 (by raising marginalized communities). It also supports SDG 12 and 13 by linking economic value to environmental conservation. However, to realize this promise fully, policy action is needed. At first the infrastructure must be improved with continued investment in roads, airports, and digital connectivity is essential to make remote destinations accessible. The Northeast Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS) and similar initiatives are steps in this direction. Secondly, institutional coordination should be strengthened by creating an inter- state tourism board or joint marketing platforms would help advertise the North-East as a unified destination. This could include creating thematic circuits (eg. a "heritage circuit" through Assam and Manipur, or an "eco-circuit" through Meghalaya and Nagaland) to distribute visits more evenly. Such strategies address the SDG 10 imperative to reduce disparities by sharing growth across states. Third, community empowerment must be prioritized. Training programs in hospitality, language, and small-business management (aligned with SDG 4 and 5) can prepare local youth and women to participate fully. Financial support for micro-entrepreneurs will ensure villagers can start homestays, guiding services, or craft cooperatives. Government and NGOs should involve local councils (Panchayats, tribal councils) in planning, drawing on the proven success of community-based tourism models. Fourth, environmental safeguards are imperative. Policies should enforce carrying capacities for fragile sites and promote green accommodations (eg. solar power, rainwater harvesting). Waste management must be addressed in popular areas to meet SDG 12 targets. Conservation agencies could use a portion of tourist fees to protect forests and wildlife (tying back to SDG 13 indicators such as forest cover). Finally, continuous monitoring through the SDG framework is recommended. The NITI Aayog reports have begun tracking SDG 8, 10, 12, and 13 at the district level. Future editions could incorporate tourism-specific metrics (eg. tourism-driven income share, or number of tourism SMEs) to measure progress. The SDG indices for North-East already call for "sustained focus and tailored strategies" in lagging goals. Aligning regional tourism development plans with these indices would ensure accountability and help reduce the documented inequalities. Thus sustainable tourism can play an important role in North-East India's development story. By generating wealth

locally and valuing cultural and natural heritage, it can narrow social and geographic divides in line with the SDGs. Realizing this potential requires deliberate policy – integrating tourism development with social equity goals. With community participation, environmental responsibility, and supportive infrastructure, tourism can become a vehicle for "sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth" that truly leaves no North-East Indian behind.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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