

Assam's Riverine Religious Tourism Industry in Guwahati Metro: Prospects and Challenges



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Introduction

River, religion and tourism are intertwined. River tourism and religious tourism are two different types of tourism that can go hand in hand. In a bid to gain more insight into the multifaceted relationship between rivers and tourism, previous research has recognized a wide variety of river tourism, including nature-based, social, cultural, and historical tourism. In 2023, travel and tourism contributed a total of 9.9 trillion US dollars to the world economy. This amount was expected to surpass pre-pandemic levels in 2024, reaching an estimated 11.1 trillion US dollars (Statista Research Department, 2024).

However, as defined by Stausberg (2011), religious tourism outlines patterns of travel in which tourists visit sites of religious significance or undertake pilgrimages in order to satisfy their religious prerequisites. Traveling primarily to inspire religious activities or objects, such as art, culture, tradition, or architecture, is commonly referred to as religious tourism. Religious and cultural travel are compatible. This is due to the fact that most cultural tourists are also regarded as religious tourists since they incorporate visits to places of worship into their travel plans as well [1].

In Indian context, pilgrimages have long been the mainstay of tourism, religion is among the oldest motivations for travel. India is the birthplace of Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Despite this Hinduism is the most common religion there, followed by Islam and Christianity. It is evident that Indians frequently visit rivers along with other waterbodies because it is considered sacred sites. According to Purana's (sacred literature of Hinduism) visiting the banks of the river and bath in the sacred rivers is a virtuous act.

Indian rivers have unique features that all the rivers have been portrayed as Goddesses except the Brahmaputra River, which has been revered as God since the Vedic period. The Indian state of Assam, once India's birthplace of Astrology and Tantric (the principles of prayer and meditation outlined in ancient Buddhist or Hindu scriptures) studies, now boasts numerous significant religious sites. Assam's capital city, Guwahati, is home to numerous religious sites and temples along the Brahmaputra River. These sites attract tourists and devotees with their cultural heritage [2]. The river's significance in India has led to the exploration of river-based tourism in Guwahati, aiming to explore prospects and challenges while recommending measures to enhance the city's tourism experience.

A Short Summary of the Study Area

India is a country in South Asia. As the 7th largest country in the world, India's geographic position bounded by seven countries. Afghanistan and Pakistan to the north-west, Myanmar to the far east, Bangladesh to the east, and China, Bhutan, and Nepal to the north. Sri Lanka (from the South-East) and the Maldives (from the South-West) are two countries that share water borders. India has a unique culture and is one of the oldest and most renowned civilizations in the world. Thousands of ethnic groups and hundreds of languages contribute to the population of India, the largest democracy in the world. India's national capital is New Delhi, and the country is composed of 28 states and 8 union territories. Assam is a state in northeastern India that borders seven other states: Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and West Bengal, as well

as two countries: Bangladesh and Bhutan. The populace of Assam is diverse in terms of sociocultural background and ethnicity. The state of Assam comprising two valleys namely Brahmaputra and Barak Valley. Rivers, streams, and canals constitute Assam's intricate and interconnected drainage system. The Brahmaputra River, along with the Barak River systems, forms a comprehensive network that drains the entire state of Assam [3].

The Brahmaputra River is one of the largest rivers in Southeast Asia that flows through three countries Tibet, India and Bangladesh from the Chemayungdung glacier in Tibet. The total length of the river is 2,900 km. After flowing through Tibet, it enters the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam and flows through Bangladesh before merging with the Bay of Bengal. The Brahmaputra River is an important river system in the North-East India that provides water for cultivation, transportation and hydropower generation. The river also serves as an important habitat for local wildlife.

Guwahati, the capital of Assam, is the largest metropolis in the North Eastern region of India, situated on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River on the foothills of the Shillong Plateau, whose cardinal points is 26011' North latitude and 91044' East longitude. Guwahati is a major riverine city with hills and serves as a starting point for various itineraries on the bank of the Brahmaputra.

Examining the Brahmaputra River's Religious Tourism Prospects in Guwahati

Guwahati, perched on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, is host to a plethora of temples and sacred places that persistently attract tourists and devotees due to their rich cultural heritage and eye-catching beauty. The Kamakhya Temple, situated on the Nilachal Hill and the mighty River Brahmaputra flows through the northern banks of the temple, is a sacred Hindu site dedicated to Goddess Kamakhya, the first wife of Lord Shiva. The temple is known for its rich history, with legends tracing back to the story of Sati, the Hindu God Shiva's First wife, who was humiliated by her father Daksha in a religious ceremony leading to her sacrifice her life at the religious site. Shiva, angered by her death, took her body on his shoulders and began travelling anywhere to anywhere. To pacify Shiva, Vishnu divided Sati's body into 51 pieces, which became Shakti Peethas (sacred place of eternal power). Today, the Kamakhya temple is where Sati's vagina fell. An annual festival called 'Ambubachi Mela' celebrates the Kamakhya Temple, the goddess of feminine power, by presenting a vagina-like stone as a symbol of a woman's ability to conceive. This ritual, marked by the menstrual cycle of Kamakhya, attracts thousands of devotees from different parts of India and other countries to pray for the fulfilment of their wishes [4]. Indeed, Assam was once associated with Tantric Shaktism, especially in relation to the Kamakhya temple. Kamakhya temple is embodied to several nearby temples, including the Bhubaneswari temple and the Chakreswar temple. Both temples offer a serene atmosphere for devotees and

tourists, with many preferring to travel uphill from Kamakhya. Chakreswar temple situated on the Brahmaputra River, features a Sudarshan Chakra (wheel) impression of Lord Vishnu on a large rock, believed to have hit Sati's lifeless body. The Pandunath temple, also located at the bank of the Brahmaputra is named after the Pandava brothers of the great Indian epic Mahabharata. According to mythology the five brothers visited the Kamakhya temple during their exile and they first worshiped in this temple. The Brahmaputra River adds an extra charm to these temples. One of Assam's most well-known pilgrimage destinations, Guwahati, is home to the Umananda Temple, which is situated on Peacock Island in the middle of the Brahmaputra River. It is regarded as the world's smallest populated river island. Mythologically stated, a trip to the Kamakhya temple would not be complete without a stop at the Umananda temple. Another one of the city's primary attractions Sukreshwar Temple, is situated on the Itakhuli hills on the south bank of the Brahmaputra River and offers a picturesque view of the powerful river meandering over its banks. The temple, a sacred fusion of Hindu and Buddhist architectural styles, features milk-white walls and carved deity images. It descends to Sukreshwar Ghat (river landing staircase term used in Indian sub-continent) on the Brahmaputra River, where people perform various worships, including post-death rituals, believed to bring salvation to the dead. The temple offers excellent views of sunrise and sunset, and is home to the Umananda and Ashvakalanta temples. Special worship is performed during the Hindu religious festival 'Maha Shivarati' and 'Shiva Chaturdashi', attracting many devotees [5].

Guwahati city hosts various religious riverine festivals, including the significant Hindu festival of Chhath Puja, celebrated in November for worshipping the Sun as a god. The festival involves six rituals, including holy bathing, fasting, not drinking water for four days, standing in cold water, and setting and giving prasada (offerings to God) to the rising sun. Thousands of worshippers gather at different ghats of the Brahmaputra River in Guwahati to worship the Sun. The ghats on the Brahmaputra River are decorated as part of a two-day festival and temporary structures are installed to open stalls such as small bamboo baskets, saffron and children's toys and balloons.

River-Based Religious Tourism Opportunities in Guwahati

River-based religious tourism in Guwahati holds significant potential for employment, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification. This tourism can generate new jobs, stimulate entrepreneurship, and create jobs highly dependent on tourism. It also contributes to sustainable economic development, as the Brahmaputra River's connection to urban areas, such as trade, commerce, housing, and tourism, can boost foreign exchange, investment, income, and pave the way for sustainable growth. Additionally, tourism can diversify the local economy, improve the balance of payments, and enhance the standard of living in the

host community. Therefore, proper exploration and promotion of river-based religious tourism in Guwahati can yield numerous benefits. The aim is to increase awareness about cultural, religious, eco-tourism, and river tourism among tourists and host communities, thereby contributing to sustainable tourism goals. The development of tourism infrastructure, including airways, railways, roads, waterways, accommodation, power facilities, and heritage management, will be significant for the growth of river-based religious tourism in Guwahati.

Challenges For River-Based Religious Tourism in Guwahati

River-based religious tourism in Guwahati faces significant challenges, including negative impacts on water quality and ecosystem degradation. Religious activities, such as throwing flowers, coconut shells, and incense sticks, contribute to waste generation in the area. Tourists also dump solid waste, such as carry bags, plastic bottles, paper cups, and food, into the Brahmaputra River, causing water pollution. The lack of sustainable development policies and community awareness can lead to the degradation of ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, and increased pollution. Artificial flooding during the monsoon season poses significant challenges to the city's infrastructure, environment, residents, and tourists. Overall, the challenges associated with river-based religious tourism in Guwahati highlight the need for sustainable development strategies and community awareness to mitigate environmental impacts [6].

Measures To Promote River Based Religious Tourism in Guwahati

The Brahmaputra River in Guwahati needs to be developed for sustainable religious tourism. This includes creating a sustainable waste management policy, promoting waste segregation, recycling initiatives, eco-friendly products, and awareness campaigns to reduce pollution. To address artificial flooding in Guwahati, urban planning, regulation, reforestation, water shed management, and strong drainage infrastructure are crucial. Additionally, the tourism industry needs proper human resource management and improvement in hospitality services. Skilled tour guides

and drivers are essential for explaining tourist places and taking tourists to tourist sites, as well as having knowledge of the tourist's language. This will help ensure the quality of hospitality services in both private and public enterprises. These measures aim to address the growing issue of waste generation and promote sustainable practices among stakeholders, tourists, and locals [7].

Conclusion

River tourism and religious tourism are symbiotic, with activities like nature-based, religious, river cruises, water sports, and cultural tourism. Religious destinations are visited by both pilgrims and non-religious tourists due to their cultural and historical significance. A significant portion of the local population relies on religious tourism, boosting the region's economy and giving more influence to locals. Economic instability affects most tourism industries, but religious tourism is less affected due to strong travel reasons and their significant role in local lives. The Brahmaputra River project by the state government aims to promote river-based religious tourism in Assam, benefiting its people and preserving its rich heritage. The project aims to attract significant tourist footfall and promote sustainable tourism practices. The government should lead efforts to involve local people in the development of sustainable river tourism, allowing them to become stakeholders in the industry and actively contribute to its growth.

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