

The Resilience of the Tourism Sector in the Aftermath of the Pandemic: A Strategic Revival Approach in Manipur, India

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ABSTRACT

The travel and tourism industry has become a significant and rapidly growing economic sector on a global scale. While the marketing and strategic identification of tourist destinations are relatively recent, there is a lack of academic research in this field. Current studies often focus on specific aspects of destination development, predominantly centred around well-known tourist spots. On the contrary, some take a more comprehensive, phenomena-driven perspective, making it challenging to establish clear theoretical boundaries.

The need to develop theoretical approaches to address how destinations can be developed from a comprehensive multilevel viewpoint has become crucial, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 global incident. This article aims to provide holistic strategies for tourist destinations by examining the case of Manipur, a state in North-East India. Additionally, the paper seeks to present a more explicit framework by closely linking it to the unique challenges faced by destination administrators, offering insights into how these theories are currently being implemented, particularly in the post-COVID-19 period. Finally, the article suggests measures for promoting rural and eco-tourism in the state of Manipur.

Keywords: *Tourism, Destination marketing, Covid-19, Marketing strategy*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a rapidly growing global economic sector, playing a crucial role in generating foreign exchange and employment opportunities for many countries. It represents a significant social and economic phenomenon characterised by the movement of individuals from their usual place of residence to another location for leisure, lasting from twenty-four hours to six months.

The onset of globalisation has triggered a cascading impact through the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting every corner of the world. This crisis has resulted in the loss of lives, jobs and an overall economic downturn, causing widespread suffering and hardship. As of August 19, 2020, the pandemic had claimed over 771,635 lives, and the economic toll was estimated to be a staggering \$2.7 trillion, equivalent to the entire economy of the United Kingdom, according to Bloomberg. However, the impacts have varied across sectors, with information and communications technology (ICT) and related industries experiencing comparatively lower consequences.

IMPACTS OF PANDEMICS AND CRISES ON TOURISM

Historically, the tourism sector has consistently faced the challenges of pandemics and crises. From the Black Death (1346-1353) to the Spanish Flu (1918-1920), SARS (2002-2004), H1N1 Swine Flu (2009-2010), and Ebola virus (2014-2016), the industry has grappled with significant challenges throughout history. The rapid spread of the Spanish flu, lasting only four months and affecting 21 million people, and the Swiss flu pandemic causing substantial losses for the Mexican tourism industry illustrate the sector's vulnerability.

During pandemics, nearly all aspects of tourism, except for the environment, experience a decline in activity and interest. Notably, COVID-19's impact on Italy, a severely affected country, has left popular tourist destinations

like Rome, Venice, and Milan eerily empty, with occupancy rates plummeting to just 6%. Predictions from the World Tourism Organization indicated a potential 20 to 30% decline in international arrivals. The World Travel and Tourism Council also raised alarm, stating that 50 million jobs in the travel and tourism sector were at risk due to the pandemic.

Despite the profound adverse effects on tourism and hospitality, the pause in travel has inadvertently had positive effects on the environment. Greenhouse gas emissions, especially in industrialised countries, have decreased, as evidenced by satellite images revealing reduced pollution in COVID-19 hotspots. China, for example, experienced a 25% reduction in emissions during lockdowns, accompanied by a 40% decrease in coal consumption at major power plants. While the pandemic has induced panic, it has also initiated a healing process for nature. As the pandemic's resolution is anticipated, the improved environmental conditions may make tourist destinations more attractive.

Airlines, tour operators, travel agencies, attractions, car rental companies, restaurants, and hotels have all felt the economic repercussions. Every service provider in the tourism value chain, from farmers supplying vegetables to restaurants to taxi drivers transporting tourists, has been significantly affected by the downturn in tourism.

ABOUT MANIPUR

Manipur, situated in northeastern India with Imphal as its capital, shares its borders with Nagaland to the north, Mizoram and Myanmar's Chin State to the south, Myanmar's Sagaing region to the east, and Assam to the west. Covering an area of 22,327 square kilometres, Manipur is home to nearly 3 million people, including the dominant Meitei community, Pangal or Pangan (Manipuri Muslims), Naga tribes, Kuki/Zo tribes and various other communities speaking diverse Sino-Tibetan dialects.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MANIPUR

Tourism promotion stands as a crucial element in the broader economic advancement of Manipur, with the potential to emerge as the leading contributor to the National State Domestic Product(NSDP). Consequently, any initiatives in this regard must align with the state's comprehensive development strategy. Despite being relatively unexplored, Manipur's tourism sector holds significant untapped potential, and there is considerable progress to be made before encountering indifference or opposition.

In the fiscal year 2017-2018, Manipur's Gross Domestic Product (GSDP) amounted to approximately US \$3.59 billion (Rs 231,670 billion). Notably, the state observed a noteworthy surge in total merchandise exports, rising from US\$ 0.19 million in 2014-15 to US\$ 2.65 million in 2018-19. Imphal, the capital, boasts an airport with air cargo services provided by Air India and other major carriers.

Traversed by 11 national highways spanning a total length of 1,750 km, Manipur is actively engaged in a national priority project: constructing a railway line along the Manipur-Assam border. This initiative is strategically aligned to provide crucial rail connectivity to the state capital. Additionally, the Indian Government has constructed a 125 km railway line linking Jiribam, Tupul, and Imphal, with an expected completion date in 2020. With an expanse of 22,327 square kilometres, Manipur boasts a pollution-free environment, offering a promising backdrop for both economic development and tourism.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this paper is to analyse and assess the potential of rural tourism in Manipur, thereby suggesting a market strategy to develop the same. To case archive the main objective, some specific objectives are considered as follows.

- 1) To find out the nature and characteristics of the destinations in Manipur under study.
- 2) To understand the potential of tourism in Manipur.
- 3) It further analyses the policy, strategy and other initiatives taken up by the State government after Covid-19 pandemic for the development of tourism in the state.
- 4) To submit and suggest various marketing strategies to the policymakers, Government and other concerned authorities for the overall development of tourism in the state especially after the Covid-19 crisis.

METHODOLOGY

The nature of the study is case-based research. The primary method used in this paper is the case study method for exploring the in-depth knowledge of tourism and various marketing components in Manipur.

The primary data has been collected through field experiments, destination visits, online & telephonic interviews. It was also gathered from the government officials in the tourism department, Government of Manipur to provide precise and accurate data for the initiatives taken by the Government. The secondary data has been collected from

published books & journals, brochures, magazines, pamphlets and various related websites etc. Finally, but not least, a SWOT analysis is also conducted to identify the various untapped opportunities and latent threats in the tourism sector by knowing the potential of the state.

TOURISTS INFLOW AND ECONOMY

Despite the fact that the tourist potential of the state has been recognised by all and the state government has started celebrating the Manipur Sangai Festival since 2010 with the main objective of projecting Manipur as a popular tourist destination, the volume of the incoming tourist flow lo fluctuated with little growth.

In total, 114,451 tourists (114,062 domestic and 389 foreign tourists) visited Manipur in 2010. A total of 1,35083 tourists, including 134,505 domestic tourists and 578 foreign tourists, arrived in the state in 2011, according to official data. Recently in 2018, it increased to 182500 (national - 176109 and foreign - 6391). The details of the tourist arrival in Manipur are reported in the story below. The state government examined a thriving tourism industry in the context of India's Act East Policy with Manipur as a gateway to Southeast Asia.

Table. 1: Tourists Arrival Trend in Manipur during 2010-2018

Year	Domestic	Foreign	Growth Rate	
			Domestic	Foreign
2010	114062	389		
2011	134505	578	17.92	48.59
2012	134541	749	0.02	22.83
2013	140673	1908	4.56	154.74
2014	115499	2769	-17.90	45.13
2015	146169	3260	26.55	17.73
2016	150638	3064	3.06	-6.01
2017	153454	3497	1.8	12.38
2018	176109	6391	14.76	82.76

Source: India Tourism Statistics, 2019 (Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India)

In the fiscal year 2018-19, the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) of the state amounted to approximately Rs 258.70 billion (equivalent to US\$ 3.76 billion). The state's GSDP is anticipated to show a CAGR: Compound Annual Growth Rate of 10.43 % from 2011-2012 to 2018-2019. Over the period from 2014-15 to 2018-19, Manipur witnessed a notable rise in total merchandise exports, climbing from US\$ 0.19 million to US\$ 2.66 million.

Table 2: Manipur and India's Gross Value Added of Tourism Industries

Particulars	India	Manipur
Gross Value Added (GVA) at basic prices (in Rupees Lakh)	61,86,95,000	8,37,565
GVATI: Tourism Characteristic Industries	4,42,92,221	47,534
Tourism Connected Industries	1,82,16,126	9,690
Tourism Specific Industries (1+2)	6,25,08,347	57,225
Shares in GVA (Percentage)		
GVATI: Tourism Characteristic Industries	7.2	5.7
Tourism Connected Industries	2.9	1.2
Tourism Specific Industries	10.1	6.8
Tourism Direct GVA	2,34,91,181.0	18,250.0
Share of TDGVA in total GVA (Percentage)	3.80	2.18

Source: NCAER Computations

ISSUES OF TOURISM IN MANIPUR

In an effort to boost the burgeoning tourism sector, the state government sponsored events like the Shirui Lily Festival in Ukhrul town and Shirui village (May 16-20, 2017) and the Barak Spring Festival in Senapati (May 22-23, 2017) as part of the Manipur Sangai festival held annually in November. However, despite such initiatives, several factors have hindered a significant influx of tourists to Manipur, as suggested by some analysts.

According to these analysts, the Imphal West, Bishnupur, and Churachandpur districts possess more significant tourism potential than the remaining districts. Both domestic and foreign tourists may hesitate to visit Manipur without adequate tourism infrastructure. To address this, the Government should identify the tourism potential in each district and ensure uniform development. The crucial components of tourism, namely hotel and accommodation infrastructure, require attention.

Factors such as political instability, frequent incidents involving gangs, blockades, general strikes, and a lack of Hindi knowledge contribute to deterring tourists from visiting Manipur. The existence of the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958) and the lingering armed conflict, though reduced, also raise concerns among potential tourists. Foreign visitors to Manipur are required to register with the district immigration office within 24 hours of arrival, adding to the restrictions. With these challenges, coupled with insufficient infrastructure and an unfavourable atmosphere, the number of tourists entering the state has shown minimal growth over the years. A scientific approach is suggested for formulating a tourism development strategy in the Northeast region, particularly in Manipur. The key points include:

- (i) There is a need for heightened awareness and promotion of tourist destinations in Manipur.
- (ii) Urgent investments in infrastructure development, including road connectivity, housing, water supply, and road infrastructure.
- (iii) Prioritising safety and security to enhance the overall tourist experience.
- (iv) Leveraging the state's tourism resources, emphasising cultural and ethnological diversity.
- (v) Addressing the lack of infrastructure for accommodating tourists in various destinations.
- (vi) Recognising tourism as a potential source of job creation and economic growth for the state.
- (vii) Highlighting the importance of educational trips at the school level as a significant tourist traffic source.

CONCLUSION

Considering a SWOT analysis, geopolitical instability, and the evolving global economy, Manipur may not emerge as a leading industrial nation, agricultural surplus producer, or a prominent trading state. However, the state holds exceptional potential for economic prosperity through tourism development, given its natural wealth, ethnological diversity, and rich cultural heritage. The tourism scenario analysis emphasises the necessity for widespread promotion of tourism, particularly in the repercussions of the COVID-19 incident. Government support, with special considerations, is deemed essential for successful implementation.

The focus should be on promoting nature tourism, complemented by adventure tourism and cultural experiences. The analysis indicates that qualitative progress is crucial to attract high-quality services where profit margins are higher and environmental management is more straightforward. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the tourism industry has historically proven resilient, and a postCOVID-19 recovery is anticipated. Crisis management plans, inspired by the COVID model, are recommended for all stakeholders to ensure the survival and growth of the tourism sector.

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