

Tea Tourism in Assam: Potential for Sustainable Rural Development

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Abstract

Tourism has emerged as an important sector for economic growth, employment generation and regional development across the world. Among the various forms of niche tourism, tea tourism has gained increasing attention because of its ability to combine agricultural heritage, cultural experiences and sustainable rural development. Assam, the largest tea-producing state in India, possesses immense potential for tea tourism owing to its extensive tea plantations, colonial heritage, scenic landscapes and global reputation for tea production. The present study examines the potential of tea tourism as a tool for sustainable rural development in Assam using secondary data collected from government reports, Tea Board publications, tourism statistics and research studies. The findings indicate that tea tourism contributes to employment generation, income diversification, cultural preservation and local entrepreneurship. At the same time, challenges such as infrastructure deficiencies, climate change, labour welfare concerns and weak destination branding continue to affect the growth of the sector. The study concludes that strategic investments, community participation, improved infrastructure and sustainable tourism planning can transform tea tourism into a major driver of rural development in Assam. By integrating tourism with agricultural heritage and local livelihoods, tea tourism can contribute significantly to inclusive and sustainable economic development in the state.

Keywords: Tea Tourism, Sustainable Development, Rural Development, Assam, Tourism Economics, Tea Industry

Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy and is increasingly recognised as an important instrument for economic growth, employment generation and regional development. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the tourism sector contributes substantially to national income, foreign exchange earnings and job creation in both developed and developing economies. In recent years, changing tourist preferences have led to the emergence of alternative forms of tourism such as eco-tourism, heritage tourism, rural tourism and agro-tourism. These forms of tourism focus on authentic experiences, environmental sustainability and cultural engagement rather than conventional

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sightseeing activities. Among these emerging forms, tea tourism has gained considerable significance as a specialised form of agro-tourism. Tea tourism involves tourism activities associated with tea cultivation, tea processing, tea tasting and plantation experiences. Visitors are offered opportunities to explore tea gardens, participate in tea-plucking activities, observe tea manufacturing processes and experience the culture and lifestyle associated with tea-growing communities. Unlike conventional tourism, tea tourism directly links agriculture with tourism and creates opportunities for sustainable rural development. Assam occupies a unique position in India's tea economy. The state contributes more than half of India's total tea production and is internationally renowned for the quality and flavour of Assam tea. Tea plantations cover vast areas of rural Assam and constitute one of the most important economic activities in the state. The tea industry provides direct and indirect employment to a large population and plays a vital role in supporting rural livelihoods. In addition to its economic significance, Assam's tea estates possess substantial tourism potential because of their scenic landscapes, colonial heritage, biodiversity and unique plantation culture.

The history of tea cultivation in Assam dates back to the nineteenth century and has left a rich legacy of colonial-era tea bungalows, tea factories and plantation settlements. Many of these heritage structures continue to exist and provide unique attractions for tourists. The combination of natural beauty, plantation culture and historical significance creates favourable conditions for the development of tea tourism. In recent years, several tea estates have diversified their activities by introducing heritage stays, tea-tasting experiences and plantation tours for visitors. The Government of Assam has increasingly emphasised tourism-led development as a strategy for promoting economic growth and employment. Tea tourism has been identified as an important niche tourism product capable of attracting both domestic and international visitors. The growing popularity of experiential tourism and rural tourism further strengthens the prospects of tea tourism in the state.

Tea tourism also holds considerable significance from the perspective of sustainable rural development. It can diversify income sources, create employment opportunities, promote local entrepreneurship and preserve cultural heritage. Furthermore, tea tourism can generate economic benefits for local communities while encouraging environmental conservation and responsible resource management. However, despite its potential, tea tourism continues to face several challenges related to infrastructure, marketing, environmental sustainability and labour welfare. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the potential of tea tourism as a tool for sustainable rural development in Assam. By analysing tourism trends, tea industry performance and existing literature, the study attempts to assess the opportunities and challenges associated with tea tourism and suggest policy measures for promoting its sustainable growth.

Review of Literature

Tourism is widely recognised as an important contributor to economic growth, employment generation and regional development. In rural areas, tourism creates opportunities for income diversification, entrepreneurship and cultural preservation. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023), tourism can play a significant role in improving rural livelihoods, reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. Rural

tourism is increasingly viewed as a mechanism for revitalising local economies and generating alternative livelihood opportunities in agricultural regions.

Tea tourism represents a specialised form of agro-tourism that integrates tourism activities with tea cultivation, processing and plantation heritage. It allows visitors to engage with agricultural practices, local traditions and cultural landscapes. Several tea-producing countries, including China, Sri Lanka and Kenya, have successfully developed tea tourism as a niche tourism product and utilised it to strengthen local economies and diversify tourism offerings.

In the Indian context, tea tourism has gained prominence mainly in tea-producing regions such as Assam, Darjeeling and the Nilgiris. Kalita (2019) observed that Assam's tea estates possess considerable tourism potential owing to their natural beauty, historical significance and cultural heritage. The study suggested that tea tourism can generate supplementary income while contributing to regional economic development.

Kumar, Biswas, Saxena and Kumar (2023) examined the opportunities and challenges of tea tourism in Assam and found that modern tourists increasingly seek authentic experiences such as tea plantation visits, tea-plucking activities and tea-tasting sessions. The authors argued that these experiences enhance destination attractiveness and strengthen visitor satisfaction, thereby increasing tourism demand.

Biggs, Gupta, Saikia and Duncan (2018) highlighted sustainability-related concerns in Assam's tea sector, including climate change, environmental degradation and livelihood insecurity among tea-growing communities. The study emphasised the importance of diversification strategies that can strengthen economic resilience and reduce dependence on tea production alone. In this context, tea tourism was identified as a potential supplementary economic activity.

Borah (2024) argued that tea tourism can support rural development through employment creation, entrepreneurship promotion and cultural preservation. The study further emphasised the need for improved infrastructure, destination branding and government support to unlock the full potential of tea tourism.

The existing literature clearly indicates that tea tourism can contribute positively to economic development, heritage conservation and rural livelihood enhancement. However, most studies focus primarily on tourism prospects, visitor experiences or plantation heritage. Limited attention has been given to examining tea tourism specifically as a tool for sustainable rural development in Assam. Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge this gap by analysing the role of tea tourism in employment generation, income diversification, entrepreneurship development and cultural preservation.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the growth potential of tea tourism in Assam.
2. To analyse the contribution of tea tourism towards sustainable rural development.
3. To identify the major challenges affecting tea tourism development in Assam.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design and relies entirely on secondary data sources. Secondary data were collected from government reports, tourism statistics, Tea Board publications, research articles, books, policy documents and academic studies related to tea tourism and rural development.

The major sources of data include the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India; Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam; Assam Tourism Development Corporation; Tea Board India; World Travel and Tourism Council reports; and relevant scholarly publications. Information relating to tourist arrivals, tea production and tourism development initiatives was obtained from official statistical publications and government documents.

The collected data were analysed using trend analysis, comparative assessment and qualitative interpretation. Trend analysis was employed to examine changes in tourism activities and tea production over time. Comparative assessment was used to evaluate the developmental potential of tea tourism in relation to broader rural development objectives. Qualitative interpretation was utilised to understand the socio-economic, cultural and environmental implications of tea tourism based on existing literature and policy reports.

The study focuses on understanding how tea tourism can contribute to sustainable rural development through employment generation, income diversification, entrepreneurship promotion, cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. The analysis further identifies major constraints and policy challenges affecting tea tourism development in Assam.

Analysis

Tourism Growth in Assam

Tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors of Assam's economy and has increasingly become an important source of employment, income generation and regional development. The state possesses a diverse range of tourism resources, including wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, religious sites, cultural heritage attractions, river tourism and scenic landscapes. Over the years, both the Government of India and the Government of Assam have undertaken several initiatives to promote tourism through infrastructure development, destination branding and improved connectivity. These efforts have contributed to a steady increase in tourist arrivals and have created favourable conditions for the growth of niche tourism segments such as tea tourism.

The performance of the tourism sector can be assessed through trends in tourist arrivals. Tourist inflow not only reflects the attractiveness of a destination but also determines the potential demand for tourism-related products and services. The growth of Assam's tourism sector is particularly significant because it provides opportunities for integrating tourism with agriculture, culture and rural development.

Table 1: Tourist Arrivals in Assam

Year	Domestic Tourists	Foreign Tourists
2018–19	60,27,002	41,209
2019–20	51,46,307	18,594
2020–21	13,51,690	347
2021–22	17,01,701	1,231
2022–23	98,12,195	18,946
2023–24	70,41,206	26,129

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam (2024).

The data reveal considerable fluctuations in tourist arrivals during the study period. Domestic tourist arrivals declined from 60.27 lakh in 2018–19 to 51.46 lakh in 2019–20 and further dropped sharply to 13.52 lakh in 2020–21. Similarly, foreign tourist arrivals declined from 41,209 in 2018–19 to only 347 in 2020–21. These declines were primarily caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely disrupted travel and tourism activities across the world.

However, the tourism sector in Assam demonstrated remarkable resilience during the post-pandemic period. Domestic tourist arrivals increased to 17.02 lakh in 2021–22 and surged dramatically to 98.12 lakh in 2022–23. Although domestic arrivals declined slightly to 70.41 lakh in 2023–24, the figure remained substantially higher than the pre-pandemic average. Foreign tourist arrivals also recovered gradually, reaching 26,129 in 2023–24.

The strong recovery in tourist arrivals indicates growing interest in Assam as a tourism destination. Increasing demand for nature-based, cultural and experiential tourism creates favourable conditions for the expansion of tea tourism. The rise in tourist inflows suggests the existence of a potential market for plantation tourism, heritage stays and tea-related tourism experiences. Therefore, the overall growth of tourism in Assam provides a strong foundation for the future development of tea tourism as an instrument of sustainable rural development.

Economic Significance of Assam’s Tea Industry

The tea industry occupies a central position in Assam’s economy and remains one of the state’s most important agricultural and industrial sectors. Assam is the largest tea-producing state in India and contributes more than half of the country’s total tea output. The industry provides direct and indirect employment to a large population and serves as a major source of income for rural households. In addition, tea exports contribute significantly to foreign exchange earnings and strengthen the state’s economic base.

The importance of the tea industry extends beyond its contribution to production and employment. Tea plantations have shaped the socio-economic landscape of Assam for more than a century and continue to influence the state’s cultural and historical identity. The vast tea

estates, colonial-era tea bungalows, tea factories and plantation settlements constitute valuable tourism resources that can be utilised for tourism development.

Recent trends in tea production provide important insights into the economic context within which tea tourism is emerging. While tea production remains substantial, fluctuations in output have highlighted the need for diversification and alternative income-generating opportunities.

Table 2: Tea Production in Assam

Year	Tea Production (Million Kg)
2019	716.49
2020	690.05
2021	695.00
2022	688.70
2023	688.33
2024	649.84

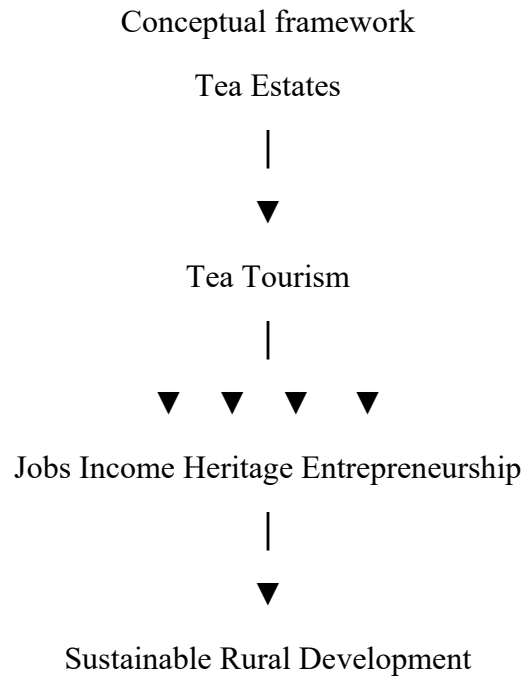
Source: Tea Board India (2024); Tea Production Reports (2025).

The data indicate that tea production in Assam has exhibited a gradual decline over the study period. Production decreased from 716.49 million kilograms in 2019 to 649.84 million kilograms in 2024. Although a marginal improvement was observed in 2021, the overall trend remained downward.

Several factors have contributed to this decline. Climate change has emerged as a major challenge for the tea industry, with rising temperatures, irregular rainfall patterns, prolonged heatwaves and recurring floods adversely affecting tea productivity. Pest infestations and changing environmental conditions have further increased production risks. As a result, tea estates are increasingly confronted with uncertainties regarding output and profitability.

The declining trend in tea production highlights the importance of economic diversification within tea-growing regions. Dependence on tea cultivation alone may expose rural communities to income instability and livelihood risks. In this context, tea tourism can serve as an effective supplementary economic activity. By generating revenue through plantation visits, heritage accommodation, tea tasting sessions and cultural experiences, tea tourism can provide alternative income streams and enhance the economic resilience of tea estates and local communities.

Moreover, the global reputation of Assam tea provides a unique advantage for tourism development. Visitors are increasingly interested in authentic experiences that combine agriculture, culture and heritage. Tea tourism enables Assam to capitalise on its internationally recognised tea brand while simultaneously promoting rural development and tourism growth.



Tea Tourism and Sustainable Rural Development

Tea tourism possesses significant potential to contribute to sustainable rural development by generating economic opportunities, preserving cultural heritage and encouraging environmentally responsible practices. As a specialised form of agro-tourism, tea tourism creates linkages between agriculture, tourism and local communities, thereby producing benefits that extend beyond the tea estates themselves.

One of the most important contributions of tea tourism is employment generation. The development of tourism activities within tea estates creates demand for hospitality services, transportation facilities, local guides, food and beverage enterprises, handicraft production and cultural performances. These activities generate both direct and indirect employment opportunities and provide supplementary livelihood options for rural populations. Employment generated through tourism is particularly important for women and youth, who often face limited employment opportunities in rural areas.

Tea tourism also promotes income diversification. Traditionally, tea estates have depended primarily on tea production and tea exports for revenue generation. However, climate-related risks, production uncertainties and fluctuations in tea prices have increased the need for alternative income sources. Tourism-related services such as plantation tours, heritage stays, tea tasting experiences and recreational activities create additional revenue streams and reduce dependence on tea production alone. Income diversification enhances economic resilience and improves the long-term sustainability of rural livelihoods.

Another important contribution of tea tourism lies in cultural preservation. Assam's tea industry is associated with a rich historical and cultural heritage that includes colonial architecture, plantation traditions, tea-processing techniques and community lifestyles. Tourism creates economic incentives for preserving these cultural assets and promotes greater awareness among visitors regarding the historical significance of Assam's tea industry.

Heritage conservation not only enhances destination attractiveness but also strengthens local identity and cultural continuity.

Tea tourism further encourages local entrepreneurship. The growth of tourist arrivals creates demand for homestays, restaurants, transportation services, souvenir shops, handicrafts and local food products. Such opportunities stimulate the establishment of small and medium enterprises and generate additional income for local communities. Entrepreneurship development also strengthens local economic linkages and promotes inclusive growth.

From an environmental perspective, tea tourism supports sustainable resource management and conservation. The attractiveness of tea tourism depends largely on the quality of plantation landscapes and natural surroundings. Consequently, tea estates have greater incentives to adopt environmentally responsible practices and maintain ecological balance. Sustainable tourism practices can contribute to biodiversity conservation, landscape preservation and responsible resource utilisation.

Overall, tea tourism offers a multidimensional approach to rural development by simultaneously promoting economic growth, cultural preservation, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. The sector therefore possesses considerable potential to emerge as an important component of Assam's rural development strategy.

Challenges of Tea Tourism Development in Assam

Despite its considerable potential, the development of tea tourism in Assam faces several structural and operational challenges that may hinder its contribution to sustainable rural development. Addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring the long-term viability and competitiveness of the sector.

One of the most significant constraints is the inadequacy of tourism infrastructure in many tea-growing regions. Several tea estates are located in remote rural areas where road connectivity, transportation facilities, accommodation services and tourism-related amenities remain insufficient. Poor infrastructure reduces accessibility, increases travel costs and negatively affects visitor experiences. Inadequate digital connectivity and limited tourism information services further constrain tourism development in many potential destinations.

Climate change represents another major challenge for both the tea industry and tea tourism. Assam has experienced increasing incidences of floods, erratic rainfall, rising temperatures and prolonged heatwaves in recent years. These environmental changes have adversely affected tea productivity and plantation sustainability. Since tea tourism depends heavily on the attractiveness of plantation landscapes and tea-related activities, environmental degradation directly affects tourism potential. The long-term sustainability of tea tourism therefore depends upon climate-resilient plantation management and environmental conservation measures.

Labour welfare concerns also require serious attention. Tea garden workers constitute the foundation of Assam's tea industry, yet many continue to face socio-economic challenges related to housing, healthcare, education and income security. Sustainable tourism development requires ensuring that local communities benefit equitably from tourism

activities. Without improvements in labour welfare and community participation, the developmental benefits of tea tourism may remain limited.

Another important challenge relates to destination branding and marketing. Despite being globally renowned for tea production, Assam has not yet established a strong identity as a tea tourism destination. Compared with destinations such as Darjeeling, Munnar and several international tea tourism regions, Assam's tea tourism remains relatively under-promoted. Limited marketing initiatives, inadequate online visibility and weak international branding have restricted tourist awareness regarding the unique tea tourism experiences available in the state.

Seasonality also poses challenges for tourism operators. Tourist arrivals often fluctuate across seasons, creating variations in demand and income. Dependence on seasonal tourism can affect the profitability of tourism enterprises and reduce the stability of employment opportunities. Effective tourism planning is therefore necessary to promote year-round tourism activities.

Furthermore, the lack of skilled manpower and professional tourism management continues to affect service quality in some destinations. Training programmes related to hospitality management, tourist guiding, heritage interpretation and destination management remain limited. Enhancing human resource capacity is essential for improving visitor satisfaction and ensuring international competitiveness.

Collectively, these challenges highlight the need for integrated policy interventions aimed at improving infrastructure, strengthening environmental sustainability, enhancing community participation and promoting destination branding.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest several policy measures for strengthening tea tourism and enhancing its contribution to sustainable rural development in Assam.

First, priority should be given to improving tourism infrastructure in tea-growing districts. Better road connectivity, transportation facilities, accommodation services, visitor centres and digital infrastructure can significantly enhance tourist experiences and increase accessibility. Infrastructure development is particularly important in remote tea-growing regions where tourism potential remains underutilised.

Second, integrated tourism circuits should be developed by linking tea estates with major tourism destinations such as Kaziranga National Park, Manas National Park, Majuli and other cultural and eco-tourism attractions. Such integrated tourism packages can increase tourist stay duration, improve visitor spending and generate broader economic benefits for local communities.

Third, greater emphasis should be placed on destination branding and marketing. Assam possesses a globally recognised tea brand that can be leveraged for tourism promotion. Strategic marketing campaigns, digital tourism platforms, participation in international tourism fairs and collaborations with travel agencies can significantly improve the visibility of Assam's tea tourism products in domestic and international markets.

Fourth, community participation should be strengthened through the promotion of community-based tourism initiatives. Tea garden workers and local residents should be actively involved in tourism planning, management and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Community participation can ensure equitable distribution of tourism benefits and contribute to inclusive rural development.

Fifth, sustainable tourism practices should be encouraged through environmental conservation measures and responsible tourism guidelines. Plantation landscapes, biodiversity and cultural heritage assets should be protected through sustainable management practices. Climate-resilient tourism strategies should also be incorporated into long-term planning frameworks.

Sixth, entrepreneurship development programmes should be promoted to encourage local participation in tourism-related activities. Financial support, skill development initiatives and capacity-building programmes can help local communities establish homestays, handicraft enterprises, food businesses and tourism services.

Finally, public-private partnerships should be expanded to mobilise investment, improve infrastructure and support innovative tourism products. Collaboration among government agencies, tea estates, tourism operators and local communities can accelerate the development of tea tourism and strengthen its contribution to rural development.

Conclusion

The present study examined the potential of tea tourism as a strategy for promoting sustainable rural development in Assam using secondary data from government reports, tourism statistics, Tea Board publications and existing research studies. The analysis explored the relationship between tea tourism, rural livelihoods and regional development within the broader context of Assam's tea industry and tourism sector.

The findings reveal that Assam possesses highly favourable conditions for the development of tea tourism. The state's globally recognised tea industry, extensive plantation landscapes, colonial heritage and growing tourism sector provide a strong foundation for expanding tea tourism activities. The recovery in tourist arrivals following the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrates increasing demand for experiential and nature-based tourism, creating new opportunities for tea tourism development.

The study also reveals that tea tourism can contribute significantly to sustainable rural development through multiple channels. Employment generation, income diversification, entrepreneurship development and cultural preservation emerge as the major developmental benefits associated with tea tourism. By creating alternative livelihood opportunities and reducing dependence on tea production alone, tea tourism can enhance the economic resilience of rural communities. The sector also contributes to preserving Assam's unique tea heritage and strengthens local cultural identity.

At the same time, the gradual decline in tea production observed during recent years highlights the need for economic diversification within tea-growing regions. Climate-related risks, fluctuating tea prices and production uncertainties have increased the vulnerability of tea-

dependent communities. Tea tourism offers an effective mechanism for generating supplementary income while simultaneously promoting tourism growth and rural development.

Despite its significant potential, tea tourism continues to face challenges related to inadequate infrastructure, climate change, labour welfare concerns, weak destination branding and limited professional tourism management. Addressing these challenges is essential for unlocking the full potential of tea tourism and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

Overall, the study concludes that tea tourism represents a promising avenue for sustainable and inclusive rural development in Assam. Through strategic planning, improved infrastructure, effective destination marketing, community participation and environmentally responsible tourism practices, tea tourism can emerge as a major contributor to employment generation, rural transformation and sustainable economic development in the state. As Assam seeks to diversify its rural economy and strengthen its tourism sector, tea tourism offers a unique opportunity to integrate agricultural heritage, cultural preservation and sustainable development within a single framework.

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