

IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON TOURISM INDUSTRY OF ASSAM, INDIA- WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK AND KAMAKHYA TEMPLE

Preceileena KOCH

*Gauhati University, India
preceileenakoch13@gmail.com*

Bimal kumar KAR

*Gauhati University, India
Bimalkar@gauhati.ac.in*

Abstract

Tourism refers to the activity where people travel outside their usual environment for leisure or business purposes. Tourism contributes to the economy, socio-cultural transmission and adaptation between the people. On an average Assam experience more than 4 million tourists from across the world every year which generates an average revenue of more than Rs. 3.1 million. However the political and the pandemic scenario since October 2019, have left the entire tourism sector devastated across the state as this was the peak season of the tourist arrival in the state which resulted to a loss of more than Rs. 300 crores. Since tourism has a dominant say in the entire economy of the region with innumerable people dependent on it, this paper has been intended to review and understand the prevailing situation of the tourism industry and tried to bring out few measure that can be adopted immediately to revive the region at the soonest. On a contrary, the study also throws light on the silver lining of the pandemic, by giving time to the nature to retrieve itself. The study is largely based on primary data collected through sample survey from a cross section of people involved in the tourism sector. The data so gathered have been processed, analyzed and presented using some meaningful statistical and cartographic techniques.

Key words: *Tourism, background, revenue, Political unrest and Covid19, measures*

JEL Classification: *Z30*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism refers to people's activity where they travel to an environment which is different from their usual environment for different purposes like recreation, business etc. It plays a great role in the economy of any region. Along with the economy, tourism has a great say in the socio-cultural and traditional assimilation and exchange among different people of different regions. Assam, being in a region embraced with immense scenic beauty attracts a large number of tourists from both inside and outside the country. Every year the state of Assam experiences an influx of about more than 4 million tourists (Assam Tourism Development Corporation Limited, 2019) from across the country and world. But this trend of tourists in Assam have been affected since November 2019, which have been further extended and accelerated by the impact of the ongoing Covid19 pandemic. The entire trend of tourists' influx to Assam has witnessed continuous growth from about 2.2 million in 2004 to about 5.9 million in 2018. But this increasing trend have been affected and have decreased to about 4.7 million in 2019 due to the political unrest during Nov- Dec 2019, for the ongoing debate on CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act). This trend has further decreased in the year 2020 due to the prevailing pandemic situation. The nation-wide lockdown across the country of India since the month of March has a

huge impact on the entire tourism sector particularly in Assam, because most of its tourists visits during the month of November to May. But due to the political unrest, the number of tourists have reduced and then when it started to improve a little, in the month of February 2020, the nation-wide lockdown was imposed since the month of March. As a result of which the whole tourism sector estimated to bear a loss of about Rs.200 crores in the year 2020 (Assam Tribune, 8th April 2020). The number of international tourists have been quite high in this region due to its rich socio cultural traditions and scenic beauty but in the prevailing situation the number of foreign tourists in the region is almost negligible as most of the tourist places in Assam, in the post lockdown period, are filled with only local residents of the state abiding by the covid19 protocols. The people involved in the tourism sector are focusing more in the local tourists than the foreign ones. Their profit-making is affected as they are bound to reduce the rates in many cases for the local tourists whereas their expenses in maintaining the covid19 protocols have increased like in sanitization, maintaining the local hygiene etc. These drastic changes have not only impacted only the local people associated with the tourism sector of the region, but also the rest of the region, as tourism in Assam plays a dominant role in revenue generation and employment provision to a great section of the people of the state. Apart from this, one cannot overlook the time given to

the nature by this political and pandemic situation to gain its essence back, which otherwise would not have been possible amidst the hustle bustle of daily lives of the people. It is with this background an attempt is made in this paper to understand the socio-economic significance of the tourism sector along with its present condition due to various factors. Understanding these various aspects related to this sector will not only help to revive the sector but will help to adopt the most appropriate measures or policies to improve its growth pace. Although studies related to the tourism sector have been conducted before, but this paper emphasizes more on how the pandemic has have its impact on it along with the post pandemic approaches that are or needs to be adopted; along with that this paper will pave ways for further studies and analysis of the same.

II. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

Several literatures related to the tourism sectors and revenue generation have been consulted to develop a conceptual framework for better understanding and to have a more appropriate approach towards the study. Apart from this, data have also been collected through a primary survey during the month of October 2020, where a total of 126 individuals who are directly related to the tourism sector across different tourist places of Assam, particularly from Kaziranga National Park and Kamakhya Temple (as these are the two most visited tourist areas of the state), were interviewed, either through field visit or via telephonic interview, based on pre structured schedule. Also, several publications, both governmental and non-governmental have also been referred, to derive reliable statistical data for smoothly carrying out the study and to validate the findings of the primary survey. The data so obtained

have been processed, analyzed, and mapped, wherever necessary, using some simple yet meaningful cartographic and statistical techniques. Finally, conclusions have been made based on the results derived and personal field observation.

Background of the tourism industry in Assam

Assam being located in a region embraced with immense scenic beauty having a wide varieties of flora and fauna, along with its large varieties of socio cultural tradition attracts a huge number of tourists every year both from within and outside the country. The most important tourist season prevails from the month of October till May. Almost 75-80% of the tourists visits the region within this time period as they get the best experience because of the soothing weather as well as local festivals and occasions that are held at this period of the year (Primary survey, 2020). The state experiences monsoon rain from the month of June till Late September, as such major part of the Brahmaputra floodplains remains flooded making the region unsuitable for any visitors, especially in its tourists' places, during this time. Assam in 2018-19, according to the Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2019, have experienced visitors from different parts of the country, with highest proportion of tourists from West Bengal (20.83 percent), followed by Bihar (19.70 percent) and Delhi (13.57 percent) etc., and about 0.68 percent of foreign tourists have visited Assam during that time (Figure 1). With the overall development in the infrastructures along with road and other basic facilities the number of people travelling to various tourists' places in Assam increased at a considerable rate annually (Table 1).

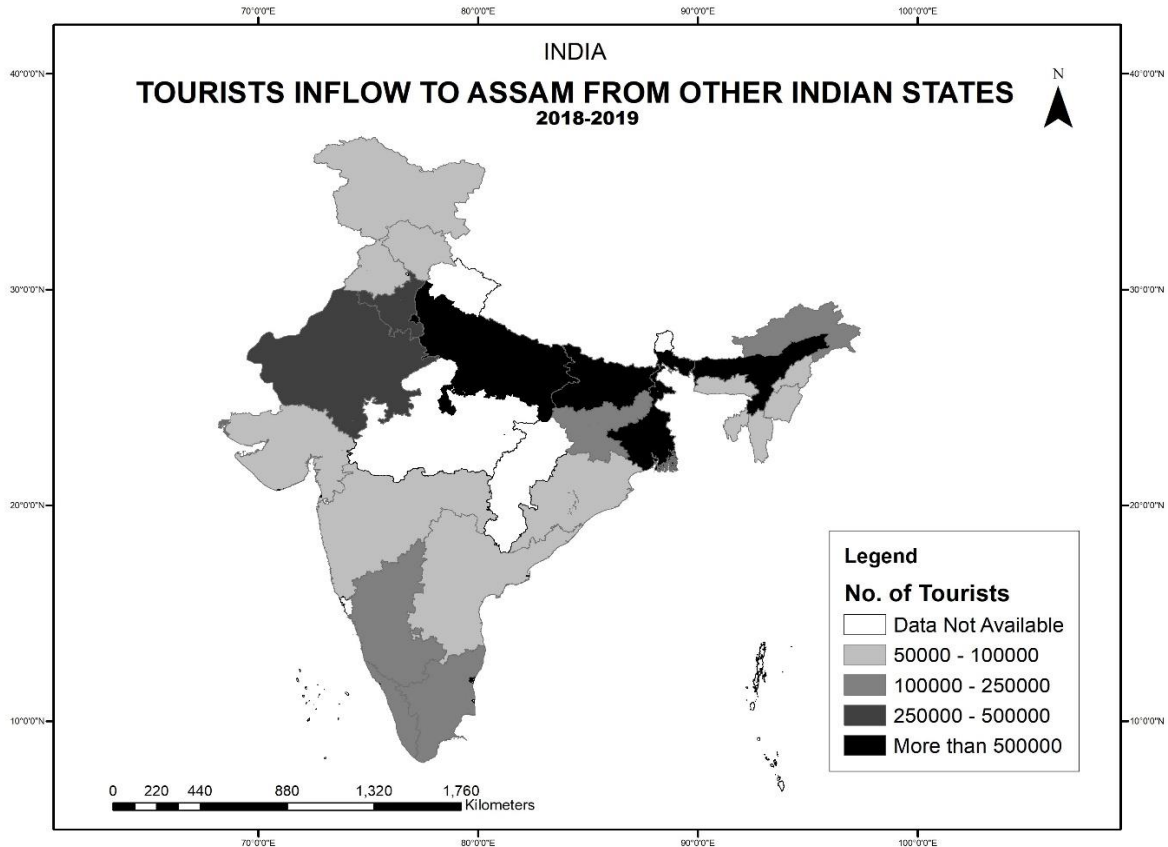


Figure 1: Map showing Number of Tourists flow from other states of India to Assam in 2018-2019
 Source: Statistical Handbook of Assam, 2019

As it is evident from the tabulated data that influx of tourists continuously increased since 2004 from 2.2 million to almost around 6 million in 2018 (Table 1). But this trend was disrupted when the influx of tourists started showing a decreasing trend in 2019. The reason for this may be accredited to the political unrest that was prevailing in Assam in the month of late November 2019 till Jan 2020. This being the peak time for the visitors visiting the region, so the tourism sector had to bear a significant loss of around Rs. 1000 crore in the month of December and January alone (The times of India, 31st December 2019). Apart from the tourism itself, many other sectors that are directly or indirectly related to this sector were equally effected. The already deteriorating situation of the tourism industry of the region was further worsened with the onset of the covid19 pandemic. The region, when it was trying to overcome the effects of the political unrest that was held on December 2019- January 2020, and was about to put its shoes on, for welcoming new visitors since the month of February, the very known covid19 have set its feet in the country around February and in Assam around late March. Soon the Central Government of the country has declared a nation-wide lockdown since mid-March as a precautionary measure to covid19 which was also implemented in the state of Assam. As such, the peak season of tourists, in the region was overcast by the lockdown which not only limited the

flow of tourists but completely have stopped it. Apart from the loss, that the state had to bear, due to the Anti CAA movement, the tourism sector has borne additional loss of around Rs. 200 crores approx. by the next three to six months since February 2020.

Table 1: Total tourists Arrival in Assam in different Years

Year	Total Tourists Arrival
2004	2293915
2006	3279808
2008	3631732
2010	4066081
2012	4528949
2014	4702165
2016	5516180
2018	5956530

Source: Assam Tourism Development Corporation Limited, 2019

Tourism has been playing an important role as a means of livelihood to many people in the region. The share of tourism employment is more than 2.5 percent of the total employment of the state (Gogoi,2017). With the over all infrastructural development and the initiatives taken by the Government to promote tourism of Assam extensively, has led to the integrated

development of this sector encouraging more and more people to get attached to it. Consequently, many people have started to get associated with it, leading to a

continuous hike in the revenue generation from this sector (Table 2).

Table 2: Total Revenue Earned across five tourist areas from tourist lodges only

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Kaziranga	1436750	1554390	900601	1021570	983650
Sivasagar	700310	735175	762694	802957	1027444
Bhalukpong	156000	177000	85600	51600	144200
Chandubi	91500	107400	214800	178040	524800
Barpeta Road	140300	163100	262400	376100	350800
Total	2524860	2737065	2226095	2430267	3030894

Source: Statistical handbook of Assam (2018, 2019)

These have provided not only a source of livelihood to many families but also have proved to be a driving force for the growth and development of the state by utilising its available resources. Therefore, despite of the entire region suffering from the effects of the corona virus, the State Government of Assam have decided to reopen the major tourists' places of the region since late October, 2020 maintaining all the covid19 protocols. The tourism industry of Assam along with the state government have decided to focus mainly on the local tourists which included mainly people from within the state rather than the visitors from outside the state or country. That means the region have decided now to focus more on local tourists rather than national or international tourists. Although these measure are going to revive the tourism industry to some extent, however, it will still be bearing losses as compared to previous years as it will not be able to have the national and international guests at its door. But mention may be made here that more than 80 percent of the respondents during the primary survey have mentioned that they are being benefited much more by the foreign or national tourists rather than the local tourists of the state due to which they are prepared to bear a considerable loss during this year of 2020.

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Impact on the Hospitality providers

The hospitality industry is one of the worst effected by the present deteriorating condition of the entire tourism since December 2019. Almost all the people being surveyed have mentioned about how they are mostly benefited by the national and international tourists more, but due to the conditions prevailing since December 2019 in the state, many of such tourists that have booked at various hotels and lodges have cancelled their bookings due to which the entire state is facing great difficulties in maintaining its pace with the rest of the economy. According to Mr. Borooah (Manager of a resort in Kaziranga National Park) have stated, 'This year (2020) we were planning to extend our branch to one more site, seeing the response that we have got in the last two years as we were expecting an increase of the tourists this session by 5-10 percent but the business have taken a total drift from profit

making to loss bearing since the end of 2019' (primary survey, 2020). The situation is same in case of most of the hoteliers that were interviewed, with almost 99 percent people stating the reason to be the government-imposed lockdown across the region.

The situation is even worse in case of Kamakhya Temple which is one of the historical heritages of the region, that attracts lakhs of pilgrims and other visitors every year from across the world. The tour and transport sector of the Guwahati City, where the temple is located, is also dependent on this temple as it is one of the renowned tourist spots of the region throughout the year. Mention must be made of the annual event known as 'Ambubachi Mela', which have been taking place since more than the last 500 years, is the most important time which attract large number of tourists every year. The total number of visitors last year in 2019 was about 25,00,000 to 30,00,000, apart from this there was almost 20,000 daily visitors in the temple, which generated a significant amount of fund for the entire temple and have also helped the local traders and shopkeepers along with the hotels and lodges to run their business. Basically according to Lalit Mohan Das, one of the respondent living near the temple, 'all the small and big shopkeepers, hotels and lodges few metres away from the temple, other taxi and auto drivers near the temple, are all benefited by this Ambubachi Mela only, which help them to generate considerable turnover for them to survive even though their business may not do well in some months of the year. But this time this people have missed this opportunity. Due to which many of them are suffering.' Another flower seller Bimala Sarma said, 'Before the covid, I used to earn atleast Rs 200 per day but now after lockdown I hardly manage to meet any earning at the end of the day. I am surviving sometimes by begging and sometimes people near the temple also donate some rice dal and potatoes with which I am somehow managing to survive', (Primary Survey, 2020).

Apart from the commercial hotels and lodges, the tourism industry was facilitating as a means of earnings to innumerable people living in the fringe areas of the tourist spots of the state who generate their livelihoods by running small scale business of homestay where they provide a closure picture of the

lives of the local inhabitants to the tourists. This attracts a great number of tourists, as the visitors are able to live the local lifestyles, they are introduced to the local customs and traditions, along with that, they also get to taste the local cuisines of the region, thus, experiencing

more lively encounter with the region as a whole. Such provisions have attracted a great number of international tourists from across the world which have in turn resulted in more local people getting inclined to tourism sector (Table 3).

Table 3: Total number of Homestays and visitors to these Homestays across Assam (2012-2020)

Years	2012 (in thousands)	2018 (in thousands)	2019-20 (in thousands)
Total Visitors to the Homestays	7.2	14.3	9.7
National and Local Visitors to the homestays	5.3	11.2	6.3
International Visitors to the Homestays	1.9	3.1	3.3
Total Number of Homestays	3.2	6.4	6.1

Source: Primary survey (2020)

As it is evident from the data (Table 3), The total number of homestays in Assam have considerably increased from 2012 to 2018 which is mainly because the state government was taking special care to promote the state tourism along with the various policies that they introduced to encourage the local people's participation and employment generation among them, but the scenario of the state didn't allow the trend to continue towards the end of 2019 till 2020 as it is showing a decreasing trend both in case of number of homestays along with the number of visitors to these home stays due to the political scenario and covid19 scenario in the region. As such along with the commercial entrepreneurs, the local people that were dependent on tourism also have suffered huge loss of around Rs. 92 Lakhs within a tenure of about 4- 5 months (Primary Survey,2020). Pallav Gogoi, founder of Bhaskar homestay, began his business 7 years ago, have mentioned that earlier excluding the rainy seasons from June to August, had a month turnover between Rs 50,000 to 1,00,000 which have reduced to less than Rs. 50,000 in the current scenario (Borthakur, 2020).

Impact on the vehicular Service Providers

More than 35 percent of the fringe population surrounding any tourist region are dependent on the travel and transport sector as a means to their livelihood. They provide taxi services, safari services or any sight seeing services. There are almost around 6000 taxi operators together in Kaziranga and kamakhya temple, who are into this profession from minimum 3 years but they have never gone through the difficulties that they are going now due to the pandemic and lockdown. Jeep safari is a very common and everyone's favourite activity in any National park or wildlife sanctuary of Assam as it enables the visitors to get a wilder experience of the place. Kaziranga alone has more than 500 jeeps owned by various private organizations and local inhabitants. These jeeps earlier used to do at least two rounds of Safari each day which generates almost Rs. 6000 per jeep per day (primary survey, 2020) which makes their total monthly income of minimum Rs. 1,80,000. During the peak season of the tourists sometimes even much more than that as

mentioned by the jeep safari providers of Kaziranga National Park. They were even expecting 30-40 percent rise in the influx of visitors seeing the trend of the previous years and were much optimistic about their business this season (late October 2019 till late April 2020). Due to this, many service providers have upgraded their vehicles with new comfort facilities, or some have even bought new vehicles with loans that have added the pressure of EMIs on them. But the sudden turmoil that have hit the entire world have not pitied on the state of Assam, and as such their entire business tactics and planning have went into vein. Due to this many of such service providers are under deep pressure and tensions, whereas many of them had no other option but to resell their vehicles as they were unable to pay the bank EMIs since January 2020. Apart from this, a great number of local inhabitants are also found there to be employed as drivers or tourist guides who are equally the sufferers as they are either completely without pay or half paid since the beginning of this year. Although the government have asked the employers not to curb out the salaries of the employees like drivers and tourist guides, but the employers have expressed their griefs stating their scarcity of funds and no adequate measures being adopted by the state. One another thing, as stated earlier, that should be noted here is that, the tourism sector is more benefited by the international visitors than the national or local visitors as they have a better scope of earning profits from them. As it is evident from the primary survey, many rates of different activities or commodities related to the travel and transport are different for national and international visitors.

The situation is not very different in case of Guwahati city of Assam where the kamakhya temple is situated. The taxi owners are suffering a huge backlog as they are unable to give salaries to the many drivers that works under them. According to Mr. Sarma (one of the owners of a travel agency in Guwahati) have mentioned that they were having enough fund and could give full salary to all their drivers for the first 2-3 months i.e. Jan to March of 2020. However, as the lockdown continued to prevail even after that, so they

had to suffer huge losses and as such, they were unable to pay any salary to their employees. Out of the total interviewees, almost 70 percent of them have accepted that they had to live their profession and get engaged into some other activities in order to feed themselves and their families. Many even started to sell vegetables or other such commodities in order to meet their needs. One of the interviewees, Mr. Sachin Das, a taxi driver of Guwahati has recently bought two taxis taking loan from bank. After being able to pay the EMIs for about 3 months, he had to sell his cars to pay his debts and feed his family. He said, 'In between time came as such that I had to start doing daily wage labour works and my wife had to also work in other people's houses in order to meet our daily needs. Now I have been hired as a driver by one service man after which things are slowly but gradually getting better after 5 months of rigorous struggles.' He also mentioned that even though things are getting better but his dream to establish his own car agency has been shattered by the anti CAA movement and covid19 lockdown.

Dual constraints faced by the tourism industry

Flood is an annual phenomenon for the entire state of Assam during the monsoon season i.e. from June till late August. It occurs every year and people of the entire state have adapted to its pros and cons accordingly. The tourism industry of the state too has been facing the impact of the flood every year. Along with economic losses, the loss that it causes to the flora and fauna is also notable. However, during this year of 2020, the state had to cope up not only with the impact of floods like the previous years but also had to cope up with the impacts of covid19 pandemic. Due to this after the annual flood of the region in 2019, when the main tourist season was at its peak from October 2019, the protest that was going on in the region prohibited the tourists from visiting the region. After which the lockdown that was called due to the ongoing pandemic have added the final nail into the coffin and have induced great loss to the tourism sector of Assam. The annual spring season of Assam i.e. the Rongali Bihu, which earlier attracted many foreign tourists fail to meet its end this year. Moreover lakhs of people visit the state in the month of June every year during the Ambubachi mela mostly from different parts of the country along with some foreign visitors that either come to worship or research was also greatly affected. The annual flood of 2020 has added the cherry on top of all the mishap, by occurring in three phases and affecting much more interior and larger places compared to the previous years.

The Kaziranga National Park is one of the most affected regions by the flood as almost 90 percent of the park was under water throughout most of the months of the present year. All these have made the park to remain close for the longest time in any year after flood due to the lockdown in the region.

Nature's Revival during the pandemic

Amidst all the negative impact that the present scenario of the state of Assam has been facing from the Anti CAA movement, covid19 pandemic and lockdown, one cannot deny or overlook the silver lining of it where time is given to the nature by the situation to retrieve itself to a state without which it would have become difficult for its survival. In Kaziranga and Kamakhya alone there are almost more than 6-7 lakhs visitors, on an average, every year. Although it brings in economic excellence and benefits to the region, but the overall ecological health of these tourists places particularly Kaziranga was greatly affected. The local people and the interviewees have expressed that the overall flora and fauna of the region is regaining its essence that was degrading since the last few years. Actually to them, although it has been a great step in promoting the eco-tourism in the region, however men doesn't follow any

restrictions or protocols and go beyond their limits due to which many flora and fauna are being effected. Mention may be made here that people of the fringe areas of the tourist's places particularly in Kaziranga are not allowed or supposed to use the forest resources for their personal uses as that belongs to protected areas. However, people usually do not follow the guidelines due to which the ecological balance of the area is disturbed as a result of which the man animal conflict has also seen a sharp increase. Moreover, with continuous increase in the influx of visitors to the tourists places have resulted in large scale accumulation of people at various tourists spots which also lead to the pollution of those places as the visitors mostly throw litters and wastes here and there polluting the entire region. This is even more risky in case of the national parks or wildlife sanctuaries where animals are present. As these animals or birds or any other aquatic animals consumes such litters or plastics which results to their deaths or hampers their health to a great extent.

However, with the present lockdown and complete closure of all the tourists places for more than six months have enable the place to retrieve itself as it is evident with the increase in the green space across the various tourist places, returning of various species of migratory and other such birds which indicates that the nature is gaining back its essence. Many animals, birds and plants that were not being usually seen, are now coming out and growing due to the lesser interference of human beings in their ways. Mention may be made here of the Lesser whistling ducks that were found wading in the dighalipukhuri which is the name of a lake amidst the city of Guwahati, that wasn't seen their since a decade at such a huge number of around more than two hundred (Karmakar, 2020).

IV. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that the entire tourism sector of the state has undergone a very unpredictable roller coaster ride this season due to the various circumstances that had stood in front of it. The entire sector had to bear a total loss of more than Rs. 1200 crores till date, the adjustment to which is almost impossible due to which the entire sector throughout the state is at great stake. Tourism has by far been one of the most important backbone of the entire economy of the state of Assam since many years now. The region is blessed with abundance of natural beauty and biodiversity of both flora and fauna which have been the most highlighting attraction for all the tourists from across the country as well as the world. However, as it is evident, the situation is completely different this season, due to the very impact of the political unrest as well as the covid19. It is a very crucial time for the entire state particularly the tourism industry to buckle up its shoes and gear up to make up its losses and to take initiatives and extra measures towards their usual business approach. As such people involved in the tourism sector must now be focusing more on the local or national tourists than the international tourists. For example, earlier the people involved in tourism preferred mostly the foreign visitors as they can make more profit within a very short span of time. But now, they have to focus more in meeting up their expenses than to making profits. As such, many hotels and lodges are now preparing themselves to welcome the local visitors with more facilities provided to the visitors like daily sanitisation along with cleaning, providing sanitizers inside the hotel compound as well as limiting the number of tourists staying in the hotel or lodge to avoid commotion of the visitors in one

place. The very local Home stay facility providers, which were earlier preferred mostly by the international tourists, as they can witness the real picture of the state, must now also focus to attract more the local visitors by providing more facilities and amenities at a cheaper rate, as now expectations of the international tourists to visit the state is almost next to impossible due to the covid19 situation across the world. Tourism being such an important role player, must be taken more seriously by the Government and more policy for its upliftment must be taken and implemented and also by promoting more the safety measures and facilities that will be provided now, to ensure people with their safety. The heads of the transport and tourism have highlighted several issues like, excusing the EMIs of the people involved in tourism for a few months now, giving low rate of interests loans to all the service providers of this sector in the state, etc to help them to rebuild their business. Although many steps and policies of providing loans with moratorium period have already been adopted by the government (G Plus,2020), but care must be taken that these measures and policies doesn't remain fragmented on paper only and are implemented in true sense of the term. All these suggests that the entire tourism industry, though facing a terrible phase, is very optimistic to revive itself and is focused to look ahead and overcome these difficult times very soon. Since tourism has a great saying in the entire economy of the state, so, it becomes very important on the part of state including the government and the people, to join hands and take adequate measure to bridge up the gaps that have been brought to the region by the prevailing situations.

V. REFERENCES

1. Assam Tourism Development Corporation Limited. Department of Tourism, Government of Assam. <https://tourismcorporation.assam.gov.in/about-us/detail/arrival-of-tourists>
2. Staff Reporter. (2020, April 8). State Tourism Industry Stares at Rs 200cr Loss. The Assam Tribune. <http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=apr0920/city052>
3. PTI. (2019, December 31). Tourism in Assam suffers Rs. 1000 crore loss due to CAA protests. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/tourism-in-assam-suffers-rs-1000-crore-loss-due-to-caa/articleshow/73048089.cms>
4. Gogoi, P. (2017). Tourism Sector in Assam: Its Economic Contribution and Challenges. Pratidhwani the Echo. 4(2), 214-219. https://www.thecho.in/files/25_msmu948u.-Purabi-Gogoi.pdf
5. Statistical Handbook of Assam. (2018,2019). <https://des.assam.gov.in/portlets/statistical-handbook>. https://des.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/ecostat_medhassu_in_oid_3/this_comm/statistical_hand_book_assam_2018.pdf
6. Borthakur, P. (2020, September 22). Amid Covid-19, Assam's Tourism Industry Screaming for Govt. Aid. <https://www.eastmojo.com/others/2020/08/23/amid-covid-19-assams-tourism-industry-screaming-for-govt-aid>
7. Karmakar, R. (2020, March 28). Lockdown enables Wildlife Claim their Territory across India. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/lockdown-enables-wildlife-claim-their-territory-across-india/article31191594.ece>
8. Staff Reporter. (2020, September 26). Respite to Assam tourism Industry after Year-long Closure. G Plus.