



Bridging North East India and ASEAN: An Examination of Buddhist Circuit's Role in the Promotion of Tourism Industry

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Abstract

In this study, the role of India's Buddhist circuit in reshaping North East India's tourism industry is explored. Manipur has eight mandalas. The paper found that mandala is a niche tourism product and promotion of mandala tourism is a divergent series of investment and will create forward linkages. There is high likelihood of increasing income and employment opportunities being achieved by North East India. For that, reestablishing and reconnection of ASEAN members with North East India through cross-border economic and cultural integration will be a good policy through coopetition such as exploiting, exploring, bridging, sharing and boundary spanning. It will bring closer economic and cultural ties between ASEAN and India and in the economic development of North East India.

Keywords: Tourism/ Buddhist Circuit/ Mandala/ Manipur/ North East India/ ASEAN

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1. Introduction

North East India is a virgin land with exceptional natural beauty. It is a hotspot of floral and faunal biodiversity with abundant mineral, water and forests resources. Yet, it is economically backward region of the country. Basic economic indicators are all below the national standards. It comprises eight states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. The region is hallmark of diversity in customs, cultures, traditions and languages. Each of the states has its own history and social and cultural identity. People speak a variety of Tibeto-Burmese languages. It is predominantly rural with over 84 per cent of the population living in the countryside. These eight states cover an area of 262,179 sq. km. constituting 8 per cent of the country's total geographical area. The total population of this region is around 46 million people which is about 4 per cent of the total population of the country. It has a population density of 175 per Sq. Km, varies from 17 in Arunachal Pradesh to 398 in Assam (2011 Census). Over 69 per cent of the population of the region lives in the state of Assam alone. Except Assam, the remaining seven states are predominantly hilly terrain that makes transportation difficult. The forest cover constitutes 52 per cent of its total geographical area.

Since the land border rather than the sea provides its access to the rest of the region, North East India is considered as a land-locked region. About 99 per cent of its total geographical boundary is shared with India's five neighboring countries (namely China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan). Out of the total land border of 5,483 kilometers, 1,346 kilometers shared with Tibet Autonomous Region, China in the North, 1,643 kilometers with Myanmar in the East, 1,879 kilometers with Bangladesh in the South-west, 99 kilometers with Nepal in the West, and 516 kilometers with Bhutan in the North-west. Breaking this landlocked condition is one of the main development strategies of the North East India.

This region is an agrarian economy. Services sector contributes predominantly in Regional Net State Domestic Products (NSDP) and is followed by agriculture. It needs a leapfrog development by shifting from traditionally agricultural economy to industrialized economy. But such transformation will not be easy to achieve. It requires foreign exchange as a source of savings and capital formation and promotion

of international trade. Its local market is very limited and unstable. Therefore, the key to modernization should be focusing on services-based economy, particularly tourism as this region has comparative advantages in tourism (Bishwanjit, 2018). Tourism provides employment and income in areas that were previously dominated by agricultural sectors. For hill states, the inflow of expenditure from an expansion in tourism services is the key to enhance economic development (NER Vision, 2020).

Promotion of tourism sector has several other comparative advantages over other sectors. “Tourism industry” involves different services, activities, and commodities (Meethan, 2008). It develops a complex network of relationships among these factors that involves the temporary migration of people for leisure purposes creating opportunities for regions and localities to change themselves as consumption hub. It commodifies place, people, and culture creating sites of leisure consumption or tourist space. It cuts across a number of sectoral boundaries. It stimulates forward linkages with other services and commodities like insurance and currency exchange, transportation, accommodation, food, and entertainment. The purchase and consumption of these goods and services are cyclical in nature (Meethan, 2008). It attracts substantial private sector investment and accommodates small enterprise development. It requires relatively low capital investment, but grows exponentially (NER Vision, 2020). Thus, this sector holds the highest promise for generating large employment and income-generating opportunities spreading and reaching down to all segments of society in North East India.

Tourism industry became one of the major foreign exchange earning industries in India, accounting for US \$27.31 billion in 2017 (ITS, 2018). India ranked 27th position in foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) in the world and 7th in the Asia Pacific Region in 2017. Number of domestic tourist arrivals (DTAs) in India during 2017 was 1,652 million (Provisional) as compared to 1,615 million in 2016, with a growth rate of 2.3%. Number of FTAs increased from 1.28 million in 1981 to 2.54 million in 2001, to reach 10.04 million in 2017. But the growth rate of FTAs had decreased recently (ITS, 2018). In contrast with the country’s trend, the growth rate of FTAs increased from 35.5% in 2014 to 43.6% in 2017 (Table 1). The total tourist arrivals in North East India increased from 71.53 lakhs in 2014 to 97.15 lakhs in 2017, registering a

growth of 35.64% (Table 2). It shows that foreign tourists have shown keen interest in North East India.

Table 1: % Change in Foreign Tourist Arrivals: 2014-2017

Year	NE total	All India	NE % of All India	Manipur% of All India	Manipur % of NE Total
2014	117,543	22,334,031	0.53	0.01	2.36
2015	118,644	23,326,163	0.51	0.01	2.75
2016	144,588	24,714,503	0.59	0.01	2.12
2017	168,786	26,886,638	0.63	0.01	2.07

Source: Indian Statistical Tourism, 2015 & 2018

Table 2: %Change in Tourist Arrivals in North East India and All India: 2014-2017

Year	NE total	All India	NE % of All India	Manipur% of All India	Manipur % of NE Total
2014	7,045,019	1,282,801,629	0.55	0.01	1.64
2015	7,940,662	1,431,973,794	0.55	0.01	1.84
2016	7,771,376	1,615,388,619	0.48	0.01	1.94
2017	9,546,639	1,652,485,357	0.58	0.01	1.61

Source: Indian Statistical Tourism, 2015 & 2018

This calls into question the role of North East India in promoting tourism in India and its importance of bringing closer economic and cultural ties between ASEAN and India. This paper traces a dynamic process through which North East India could promote tourism industry though Buddhist Circuit by connecting this region with Southeast Asian countries. Manipur has eight mandalas. This mandala is a niche tourism product of the region, particularly for Manipur. This paper contributes to the understudied tourism and bordering nexus through mandala tourism under the Buddhist Circuit Scheme.

The rest of the paper is arranged as follows. The second section discusses about Mandala, its whereabouts and historical background of Buddhism in Manipur. The third section examines how the mandala tourism through Buddhist circuit can

promote tourism industry in North East India in particular and India, in general. It further examines the role of ASEAN's Buddhist pilgrimage in articulating this strategy. The final section then draws conclusion and some suggestions are proposed.

2. Mandala: A New Niche Tourism Product of North East India

2.1. What is a Mandala?

Mandala is a circle of symbolic forms with one basic pattern: symbol at the center representing absolute truth itself, and other symbols arranged at the various points of the compass representing manifested aspects of this same truth (Cairns, 1962). In other words, mandala means 'circle' in the ordinary sense of the word and contains a quaternary or a multiple of four, in the form of cross, a star, a square, an octagon, etc. (Jung, 1973, p.3). In Southeast Asian countries, mandala is a geometric representation of the cosmology and administrative model and by means of which man's alienation from himself, from Nature, and from God is overcome. In Tibet, it plays a major role in the Tantric form of Mahayana Buddhism. They believed that a truly spiritual life can be attained by following a Tantric form of Buddhism. Both in Tantric Buddhism and Tantric Hinduism, its general significance is the interpenetration of the material and spiritual worlds, i.e., of samsara and nirvana (Cairns, 1962). The philosophical basis for the representation of this interpenetration of the two worlds has three sources:

- (1) the teaching of the Yogacara school that all things are manifestations of Absolute Mind;
- (2) the Midhyamika concept that the Absolute Mind in its transcendental form is Szinyatg (Void) and
- (3) the central idea of the Buddhavatamsaka Szitra, the interpenetration of the transcendental Void and the samsara world. It is this idea of the Buddhiavatamsaka Sitra which is central in mandala symbolism (Cairns, 1962).

Every mandala has its own peculiarity. For example, the Eastern mandalas are used ceremonially and their figures are fixed by tradition. They may be drawn or painted or, in certain special ceremonies, even represented plastically. Mandalas



found in monasteries and temples were less significant because they were external representations only. The true mandala is always an inner image and built up through imagination, at such times when psychic equilibrium is disturbed or when a thought cannot be found and must be sought for, because it is not contained in holy doctrine (Jung 1968: 95). The shape of Mandalas discovered in Manipur are very consistent with the basic mandala motif found in many eastern traditions which is a square with four cardinal gates or directions and eight lotus petals motif commonly appearing in the center.

2.2. Eight Mandalas Discovered in Manipur

Manipur is one of the eight states of North East India which is located at the extreme Northeastern corner of India. The capital of the state is Imphal. Manipur was once an ancient independent Kingdom in North East India. Manipur became a princely state under British rule in 1891. On 15 August 1947, she became briefly an independent country. She adopted the Manipur Constitution Act, 1947. On 11 August 1947, the then King of Manipur, Maharaja Budhachandra signed an Instrument of Accession, joining the India Union. Later, on 21 September 1949, he signed a Merger Agreement, merging the kingdom into India Union. This merger was later disputed by groups in Manipur on the ground that it had been completed without consensus and under duress. In October 1949, Manipur became part of Part C State of India. It was made a Union Territory in 1956 and a fully-fledged State in 1972.

Manipur covers an area of 22,327 square kilometers. It is bounded in the north by Nagaland, in the East and South by Myanmar, in the South-west by Mizoram and in the West by Assam. Out of 1643 km long Indo-Myanmar border land, Manipur shares a 390-km-long porous border with Myanmar which is about 24 per cent of the total Indo-Myanmar border land. There are three major ethnic groups. The Meiteis in the valley and the Naga and Kukis-chin group of people at the surrounding hills occupy the State. These ethnic groups belong to Mongoloid racial stock and speak Tibeto-Burman languages.

Eight mandalas have been discovered in Manipur so far (Figure 1) (Somorjit, 2018; 2019). The first Mandala was discovered at Maklang paddy field in 2013

(Maklang Mandala) (Figure 2). It has four similar protruding rectangular ‘gates’ in the cardinal directions guarded each by similar but smaller rectangular ‘gates’ on the left and right. There are an eight petalled flowers or rayed-star, recently called as Maklang ‘Star Fort’ by the locals, in the center. This mandala may be the world’s largest mandala built entirely of mud. It covers a total area of around 224,161 sq. meters. It is situated at 12 km aerial distance from Kangla Fort at Imphal. The second Mandala is situated at Heikakmapal Khabam paddy field covering a total area of about 122,232 sq. meters (Heikakmapal Mandala) (Figure 3). The third and fourth Mandala are situated at Phurju paddy field which cover a total area of around 117,517 sq. meters and around 117,466 sq. meters respectively (Phurju Mandala A and B) (Figure 4 & 5). The fifth mandala is located at Sagolmang covering a total area of 120,084 sq. meters (Sagolmang Mandala) (Figure 6). The fifth mandala is only 3 km away from the twin mandala of Phurju. The sixth mandala is located at Sekmai which covers a total area of 65,145 sq. meters (Sekmai Mandala) (Figure 7). The seventh Mandala is located at the paddy field of Keinou, Bisnupur District (Keinou Mandala) (Figure 8). The Keinou earthwork pattern is found similar with the Sekmai Mandala except that it has only two layers. It is a pattern of eight rayed star-shaped. It covers a total area of around 21,756 sq. meters with total circumference distance of 584 meters. Number eight Mandala is discovered at a small village called Nongren in Imphal East District (Nongren Mandala) (Figure 9). It is encircled by an earthwork that runs about 2.25 km covering a total area of 268,386 sq. meters. It has the archetypal protruding gates in the cardinal direction similar with those four Mandalas discovered on the bank of the Iril River of Manipur.

Though mandala occupies an important space in Buddhism, the exact motive or reason of building these mud mandalas in Manipur is, for the time being, not clearly understood. Whether they were built for tantric purposes or for building temple such as in Odissa (Donaldson, 1995) cannot be confirmed as any proper research has been pursued. Finding an answer to these questions lies outside the scope of this paper. Whatever the reason maybe, based on these evidences, these discoveries could be one of the most intense archaeological discoveries in recent years that could redefine the history of eastern thought and tradition of mandala.



2.3. Prevalence of Buddhism in Manipur

Manipur's ethnic people practice a variety of religions. Hinduism is the major religion in the State, closely followed by Christianity (Census 2011). Other religions include Islam, Sanamahism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc. As far as Buddhism practices in Manipur are concerned, no written record has been found in early manuscripts and other official records. But, many rich Buddhist artifacts and statues of historical importance excavated in and around the mandala sites. In March and April 1991, Archaeology Survey of India and Manipur State Archeology excavated a mound at Sekta village, few meters away from the Heikakmapal Mandala (Sharma, 1994, p.25). They also recovered a large number of secondary burial pots, copper burial masks with human skulls, porcelain wares and 'Buddhist' relic caskets. The artifacts of tripod ware culture, including animal skeletons, were also found at Moirang Kampu Sajeb, 7 km south-west from Sekta, on the eastern bank of the same river in December 2013. Till to our knowledge, tripod is not found in any other places of India except Manipur.

In early days, King Khagembra, who reigned Manipur from 1597-1652 AD, built the statue of Buddha at Kharam near Kajikhul village, Imphal West District (Kamei, 2015, p.52). This statue was built just few meters away from the Maklang Mandala. Several other Buddhist statues were discovered at different places of Manipur namely Kakching, Utlou Langpok, Tera Keithel, Langthabal, Khamnam Keithel, Erengbam Leikai, Tengnoupal, Bamol Leikai, Tengoupal, Yaiskul Janmasthan and Nongmaiching hills (for more details see Birajit, 2014, p.87). Some section of local people of Manipur even worshiped Buddha as the Lord Shiva. For example, a 1.74meter high Parinirvana statue of Buddha at Ingourok near Khurukhul Village, is being worshiped as the lord Shiva by the Meiteis since 1900 (Kamei 2015, p.52). On the other side, the place where Nongren Mandala is located is known as "Napet or Napit Palli" in local language. The word "Napet/Napit" itself means those people who were traditionally engaged in hair cutting or shaving. There is a historical record that around 15th Century some Buddhist monks coming from Kabaw (the present-day Shan of Myanmar) settled in this Napit Palli. At that time, the Shans of Kabaw valley were the subjects of the Kingdom of Manipur. Therefore, those people

were Buddhist from the middle of the fifteenth century settled in Manipur during the reign of King Kiyamba (Kamei, 2015).

Sharma (1994) claimed that Buddhism was prevalent in the valley in Manipur and also a sizeable population of wealthy people was settled in and around Sekta (Sharma, 1994, pp.75-77). Sekta is the place just few meters away from the number sixth mandala (Sekmai Mandala). Kamei (2015) also agreed on this view by hinting that these sculptures reflected the prevalence of Buddhism in the Kingdom of Manipur. These claims were made before the discovery of all these mandalas. The interesting fact that was coming out recently is that those Buddhist artifacts and archeological evidences are found in and around these mandalas. This solidifies their claims that Buddhism was prevalent in early days in Manipur. Furthermore, Somorjit (2018) provided a fresh evidence of the existence of Buddhism in Manipur with Ouroboros. Ouroboros is the symbol of the snake or dragon biting its tail, symbolizing wholeness or infinity. In Manipuri culture, Ouroboros occupies a very important place and is being worshiped. He claimed that Ouroboros is the visual representation of Mandala.

Apart from history and archeological findings, one cannot overlook the geographical location of Manipur. Manipur has been at the crossroads of Asian economic and cultural exchanges for more than 2,500 years. Manipur had bilateral relations with the neighboring countries. The Indians and Westerners who travelled to China, Myanmar and Southeast Asian countries had to pass through Manipur. People from the Eastern and Western sides settled in Manipur and several Manipuris have also migrated into neighboring countries as well (Sanajaoba, Vol 4, p.2 , p.49). Thus, Manipur has long connected the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia to Southeast Asia, China, Siberia, Micronesia and Polynesia, enabling migration of people, cultures, and religions.

Buddhist preferred the U-shaped valleys like Manipur to establish monasteries and viharas (Sharma, 1994, p.75). Therefore, the construction of eight mandalas and favorable geographical location of Manipur may not be a coincidence. Manipur's incredible range of climate and vegetation with thick forest residing in subtropical Himalayan region within protective ranges of mountains and rivers are perfect placed

for medication and finding enlightenment. These features are very much consistent with the idea of the 'Beyul or Hidden Paradise'. It might not be surprising if Manipur turns out to be one of the 'Beyul' of Padmasabhava.

3. Promotion of Tourism industry in North East India

3.1. Promotion of Tourism through Buddhist Circuit

The Buddhist Circuit is a route that follows in the footsteps of the Buddha in India and is one of the fifteen thematic circuits identified for development under the Swadesh Darshan – Integrated Development of Theme-Based Tourism Circuits Scheme of Ministry of Tourism (MoT). All sites in India related to Buddhism are covered under the Buddhist Circuit for development. MoT has sanctioned five projects for Rs. 355.26 crore under the Buddhist Circuit theme covering the States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh and work on all the projects is under implementation. This Circuit is now expanded to 21 other states. The Buddhist Circuit is a key pilgrimage destination for 450 million practicing Buddhists¹. To increase India's share of the global tourism market and to attract more overseas Buddhist pilgrims, three 'Buddhist Circuit' routes have been identified in the country with the help of state governments and private stakeholders in 2015.²

Out of the 8 North East Indian states, two States namely Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh have already been included in the Buddhist circuit under the Buddhist Heritage Trials (State Circuits). Since eight mandalas have been discovered in Manipur so far, Manipur should have been included in this State Circuits. Possessing such an invaluable cultural heritage like mandala might turn out to be a big boon for North East India in changing the face of its tourism industry in the years to come. These mandalas might not be ordinary mandalas. Maklang Mandala is said to be one of the largest Mandalas in the world made entirely of mud (Somorjit, 2018). Few places possess such a mystic cultural relic. It has the high potential of attracting thousands of tourists, particularly Buddhist pilgrims, from all over the world. One

¹*Economic Times* "Government eyes funds from World Bank, Japan to develop & promote Buddhist Circuit"

² Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Culture, 04-March-2015 14:49 IST, 3 Buddhist Circuits identified by the Ministry of Tourism available at <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=116398>



Mandala is enough to attract thousands of tourists, both domestic and international and in Manipur. Thus, these mandalas could be a niche tourism product of this region that will help in promoting tourism industry.

Table 3: The Details of the Three Buddhist Circuit Routes:

Name of the Routes	Detail of the Routes
Circuit 1	The Dharmayatra or the Sacred Circuit
	This will be a 5 to 7 days circuit and will include visits to Gaya (Bodhgaya), Varanasi (Sarnath), Kushinagar, Piparva (Kapilavastu) with a day trip to Lumbini in Nepal.
Circuit 2	Extended Dharmayatra or Extended Sacred Circuit or Retracing Buddha's Footsteps
	This will be a 10 to 15 days circuit and will include visits to Bodhgaya (Nalanda, Rajgir, Barabar caves, Pragbodhi Hill, Gaya), Patna (Vaishali, Lauriya Nandangarh, Lauriya Areraj, Kesariya, Patna Museum), Varanasi (Sarnath), Kushinagar, Piparva (Kapilavastu, Shravasti, Sankisa) with a day trip to Lumbini in Nepal
Circuit 3	Buddhist Heritage Trails (State Circuits)
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">i. Jammu and Kashmir – Ladakh, Srinagar (Harwan, Parihaspora) and Jammu and Kashmit (Ambaran).ii. Himachal Pradesh – Dharamshala, Spiti, Kinnaur and Lahaul.iii. Punjab – Sanghon.iv. Haryana – Jind (Assan), Yamunanagar(Sugh).v. Maharashtra – Aurangabad (Ajanta, Ellora, Pithalkora Caves), Pune (Karla Caves), Mumbai (Kanheri Caves), (Bhaja Caves) and Nashik (Pandavleni Caves).vi. Andhra Pradesh – Amravati, Nagarjunakonda, Vizag (Borra Caves, Salihundum Caves).vii. Madhya Pradesh – Sanchi, Satdhara, Andher, Sonari, Murulkurd.viii. Odisha – Dhauli, Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri, Udaygiri, Langudi, Khandagiri.ix. Chhattisgarh – Sirpur.x. West Bengal – Kolkata (Indian Museum)xi. Sikkim – Rumtek, Enchay and other Monasteries.xii. Arunachal Pradesh – Tawang and Bomdila.

3.2. Bridging North East India and ASEAN through Religious Tourism

Religious Tourism refers to travel in quest for a religious experience or the products they induce such as art, culture, traditions, architecture and holy places (SIGA, 2012, p.3; Nolan et al., 1992). Indian civilization is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. One can say that India is an offshoot to almost every major religion in the world, for example, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Vaishnavism, Judaism, etc. Hinduism dominates in India followed by Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Despite having these facts, religious tourism in India is not prospered up to extent that it should be. Let's take Buddhist pilgrimage as an example. There are around 535 million Buddhist populations in the world in 2019 (Table 4). Almost 90% of the world Buddhist population resides in South, East and Southeast Asian countries. Table 4 shows that 151 million Buddhist population resides in ASEAN countries, 252 million in China and 3.4 million people in Bhutan and Nepal together. Myanmar has 54 million Buddhist populations. There are about 96 million Buddhist populations in Japan and South Korea. Buddhism originated in India and the main Buddhist pilgrimage sites are in India. But less than 1 per cent of world Buddhist pilgrims visited India³. Most of the Western Buddhist tourist went to South East Asian countries. It implies that South East Asia has become traditional markets for Buddhist pilgrims instead of India. The major concern of India is that India could not take full advantage of this new trend of tourist movement. India wants to reverse this trend. That's why Indian government has launched Buddhist circuit scheme to increase visitation of Buddhist tourist in India.

This is where the importance of North East India and the relevance of mandala tourism lie in bridge-building between India and South East Asian countries. Cultural exchanges are a way of building bridges between the two regions. With the rising economic influence of various parts of Southeast Asia, domestic and intra-regional tourist mobility will rise in the coming decades. At the same time, there is an increase in religious motivated travel and visitation to sacred sites in the world. Visitation to religious sites depends on the relationship between tourists and their beliefs (Raj, 1992). The strength of their religious beliefs determines the visitation patterns of

³ *Tourism News Live*, “Govt set to expand Buddhism tourism circuit to 21 more states”, May 12, 2018, Available at <http://www.tourismnewslive.com/2018/05/12/govt-set-to-expand-buddhist-tourism-circuit-to-21-more-states/>



pilgrims. Mandala occupies an important space in Buddhism. Believers believed that mandala has an extraordinary link with the divine. Mandala which has highly religious significance with historic and/or artistic importance can attract thousands of pilgrims. Mandala may or may not be a religious tourism attraction by virtue of its historical, artistic, or architectural endowments can attract interest for the casual tourist. It means that people who are interested in art, architecture, or history are also potential tourists. The architectural and artistic beauty of these mandalas will surely induce those casual tourists to visit in Manipur. Besides Manipur, Tawang Monastery of Arunachal Pradesh (included in the State Buddhist circuits) is the second biggest and oldest Monastery in Asia. It is known as the Tawang Ganden Namgyal Lhatse i.e., the celestial paradise of divine site chosen by the horse. It was founded by Merag Lodroe Gyamtso in the year 1680-81. The Dalai Lama gave him a painting of goddess Palden Lhamo to be kept in the monastery. and is known as the Tawang Ganden Namgyal Lhatse i.e., the celestial paradise of divine site chosen by the horse was founded by Merag Lodroe Gyamtso in the year 1680-81. A painting of goddess Palden Lhamo painted by his Holiness Dalai Lama is kept in the monastery. Rumtek Monastery of Sikkim is the home of his Holiness, the Gyalwa Karmapa of the Kargyu Sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, Manipur along with other North East Indian states could bring thousands of Buddhist pilgrims including those Western Buddhist tourists who visited Southeast Asian countries to India.

Table 4: Buddhist Population of Countries and Region in 2019

Name of the country	Buddhist Population	Remarks
Bhutan	763,092	2019 estimates
Laos	7,169,455	2019 estimates
Myanmar	54,045,420	2019 estimates
Thailand	69,625,582	2019 estimates
Sri Lanka	21,323,733	2019 estimates
China	252,013,395	2010 estimates
Japan	88,065,372	2010 estimates
Korea	7,969,805	2010 estimates
Nepal	2,674,583	2010 estimates



Name of the country	Buddhist Population	Remarks
ASEAN*	150,577,684	2010 estimates

Source: World Population Review & The World Factbook, CIA

*includes Laos, Myanmar and Thailand Buddhist population

Despite of these considered pilgrimages and mandala sites, tourists are interested in colorful festivals including religious festivals (Nolan et al., 1992). India is a land of colorful festivals, celebrating throughout the year. Many colorful pilgrimage events like processions in folklore costume, special music and exotic rituals have been performed. North East India has also celebrated different kind of festivals ranging from national festivals to music festivals, and from religious festivals to harvest festivals. The rich cultural heritage of the North East India with its distinguished communities and tribes alongside with unique musical inheritances give this region a definite edge over the rest of the nation. These rich and vibrant festivals will attract a large number of tourists in North East India.

The present tourist flows in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands is mainly unidirectional, because Manipur has no unique products to offer to Myanmar and others. In addition to it, India could not offer the product diversity as much as China offers to Myanmar. This unidirectional pattern of tourist flows can be reversed if Indian government assimilate North East Indian states in ASEAN's pilgrimage tourist routes through Indo-Myanmar cross-border trading. It further promotes cross-border tourism. Promotion of cross-border tourism from the bottom could reduce regional development disparities in both sides of the border and stabilize the periphery regions of India and Myanmar namely Manipur and Sagaing Province. This has been a constant endeavor of both the countries. Thus, India should initiate for regional cooperation with neighboring countries to encourage cross-border tourism initiatives.

The only thing necessary for the policymakers to materialize this idea is to link Manipur into the already promoted Buddhist tourism, which starts from Lumbini in Nepal, where Buddha was born, to the sites in India he traversed, including Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir, Vaishali, Sravasti and Sankasija (in UP and Bihar). Because of Manipur's geographical proximity to the most affluent Buddhist tourist

origin markets, particularly Myanmar and ASEAN, in general, the potential of making Manipur as a common Buddhist tourist stop is very high. From Manipur, Tawang Monastery of Arunachal Pradesh or Rumtek Monastery of Sikkim can be reached either by air or by road or by train. For the time being, if a tourist wants to go there by air, he/she has to go through Guwahati Airport. Journey by road is quite long and uncomfortable. If Manipur is linked to this circuit, tourists can fly directly from Imphal airport. Any foreign tourist, who has landed to Imphal, can also easily go to any parts of the country. For example, a Myanmarese who wants to fly to Bodhgaya has to go either via Yangon or via Kunming, then to Kolkata, and finally to Bodhgaya (either by air or road). It is not only costlier but also time consuming. As tourists are very sensitive to travel time cost, he will be reluctant to visit India in spite of his quest for Bodhgaya. If he comes to Bodhgaya via Manipur, it will save a considerable amount of money and time. People can also go to other parts of the world from Imphal to Mandalay or Yangon.

Yunnan Model, in terms of tourism development through air transport, is worth mentioning in the process of making North East India a tourism hub. Yunnan Province and North East India share some common homogeneity. Like North East Indian states, Yunnan Province is an isolated, landlocked and mountainous region with only 6% of its geographical area in plain region and the rest covered by mountains and rivers. Yunnan is known as the land of minority with 24 different ethnic tribes and is bestowed with magnificent natural beauty. In spite of being rich in natural and mineral resources, the role of manufacturing industry was very marginal in provincial economic growth due to its landlocked feature.

At one point of time, tourism was also not as developed as it is now due to poor road transportation condition. After improving tourism transportation particularly air transport, Yunnan's tourism industry experienced radical changes. Tourism became a solid pillar industry and a driving force for the rapid local development of Yunnan economy. Tourism revenue accounted for more than 10% of the total GDP and the share has been increasing year by year (Jian et al., 2017). Through a well-developed civil aviation airport system, Yunnan has finally overcome its disadvantages of being a mountainous region and turned the odds towards its favor

by minimizing the time and space barriers. Tourism revenue is relatively higher in the areas where there is beautiful natural scenic resources, relatively backward economy, remote location and border area with bad traffic condition (Jian et al., 2017). This is the way which Indian policymakers should ponder upon to develop remote states like Manipur. Promoting air connectivity to hinterland areas will have positive spillover effects to metro areas as factors of production becoming expensive in various metro cities (NCAP, 2016). Therefore, it is highly pertinent to develop another regional economic hub center in North East India other than Guwahati (the state capital of Assam).

Promoting Guwahati as both commercial and regional hub is a zero-sum game in reducing regional development disparities. Due to Assam's locational advantages and demographic dividend, Guwahati is already the New York of this region in terms of economic activities and opportunities. Therefore, it is necessary to develop other cities like Imphal (the state capital of Manipur) as a regional hub of Southeast Asia. Imphal airport is the second largest airport in North East India. As per an International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) study, the output and employment multipliers of aviation are 3.25 and 6.10 respectively and contributes over 4.5% of the global Gross Domestic Product (NCAP, 2016). It means that the growth in aviation will create a large multiplier effect in terms of investments, tourism and employment generation, especially for unskilled and semi-skilled worker. For example, spending Rs. 100 on Manipur's air transport will contribute to Rs. 325 worth of benefits, and every 100 direct jobs in air transport creates 610 jobs in the economy. Thus, the positive spillover effects of developing other remote cities as regional hub will far outweighs the benefit arising from developing only Guwahati as the engine of growth of North East Indian economy. This idea is also consistent with the approaches that Chinese government had adopted to develop her landlocked provinces. Chinese government made Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan province as regional hub of South and Southeast Asian countries instead of Chengdu, provincial capital of Sichuan province. Sichuan province has more economic opportunities than Yunnan province. Developing these two provinces simultaneously enabled China to develop neighboring landlocked provinces of these two provinces like Guangxi, Xinjiang, Tibet, etc. thereby significantly reducing regional development disparities in China.

4. Conclusion

Given the economic potential of religious motivated travel in an increasingly globalized world, Indian government should look to North East India and the mandalas as a potential resource that can be commodified and packaged in the tourism marketplace alongside the growth of other leisure activities. There is a long and pervasive history of connections between India's Buddhist sacred space and the influx of Asian pilgrims. Religious tourism has long played an important role in cross-border cultural and economic processes. The prospect of promoting spiritual tourism in North East India by identifying new Buddhist and Hindu tourist circuits is very high. It will help in bringing a closer tie with India and Southeast Asian countries through culture and religion. Mandala tourism has, as of now, relatively no value as tourist attractions as it is only regional importance in Manipur. Once Manipur has been included in the State Circuits route and develop its infrastructure accordingly, Mandala will be a major marketable attraction for North East India, attracting a large number of devotees of Lord Gautam Buddha and Buddhist pilgrimages in the whole Southeast Asian countries.

The initiation of such niche tourism market is not only globally competitive but also provides opportunities to maximize the impact of tourism products that involve disadvantaged communities which is the main thrust area of every tourism policy. Mandala tourism is a community centric economic and social development program. It involves disadvantaged and marginalized communities. Most of the development initiatives of the state including tourism marginalized local communities due to a lack of capital and market linkages. Since all the mandalas are located at remote villages in rural paddy fields where State government often fails to incorporate in its development strategies to create new income and employment opportunities, promoting mandala tourism in these villages will create alternative sources of employment opportunities, such as cultural performance, tour guiding, food and beverage provision, homestays, handicraft retailing, etc. Most of these villagers' incomes mainly depend on agriculture which is very limited and agriculture being mostly depended on the mercy of monsoon leaves the villagers no other decent alternative source of income. This initiative will provide alternative source of income.

Above all, the mandala tourism could be a pan regional tourism involving the development of linkages within North East India and between Northeast India and other regions of the country. It can promote international tourism with well-established air connectivity from within NER to neighboring East and South East Asian countries.

Suggestions:

1. The state government must cooperate with tourist development in visa policy, foreign exchange requirements, and import regulations to open up new areas to mass tourism.
2. Marketing cultural experiences to tourists through advertisement domestic and abroad is necessary. Promote spin-off industries like travel agents, tourist guides, publishers of guidebooks, etc. to help tourists make some sense of what they see and to channel their perceptions-and spending in particular directions. In Manipur, local people did not know enough of their own culture and history, the government should publish pamphlets for local distribution to rectify the problem.
3. "Tours of living culture" and "staged production" should be promoted to experience tourists the culture of Manipur. In "tours of living culture", tourists are brought to see cultural forms in their natural settings: religious shrines, markets, ceremonies, etc., and offer tours to such events as cremations, weddings, tooth-filing ceremonies, and priestly ordinations. In staged productions, it can be promoted through dance and theater performances, ceremonies, craftsmen working, chefs cooking, etc.
4. Social tourism such as visits by family and friends and "business" tourism like conventions, business contacts, education, research, etc. should be promoted.
5. Of all the sectors of Manipur's economy, tourism is that most adversely affected by bad law and orders. The "definition of Manipur and North East India" has to be redefined. Manipur is now categorized as "a land not to visit" due to bad law and orders, insurgency, poor infrastructure, etc. Branding Manipur in this fashion is the real problem. Backwardness and poor infrastructure are not a real problem at all. For instance, tapping restrictions on



foreign tourists entering to Manipur muzzles the sprout of Manipur's tourism growth.

6. Tourism can affect the environment and remedial measures should be taken up to fulfill the principles of sustainability. Such measures could be more sensitive hotel design, development restrictions and building moratoria, curtailment of quarrying and mining, sensitive landscaping, more effective sewage treatment and garbage disposal, recycling and minimization of waste, and education programs to eliminate harmful tourist activities.

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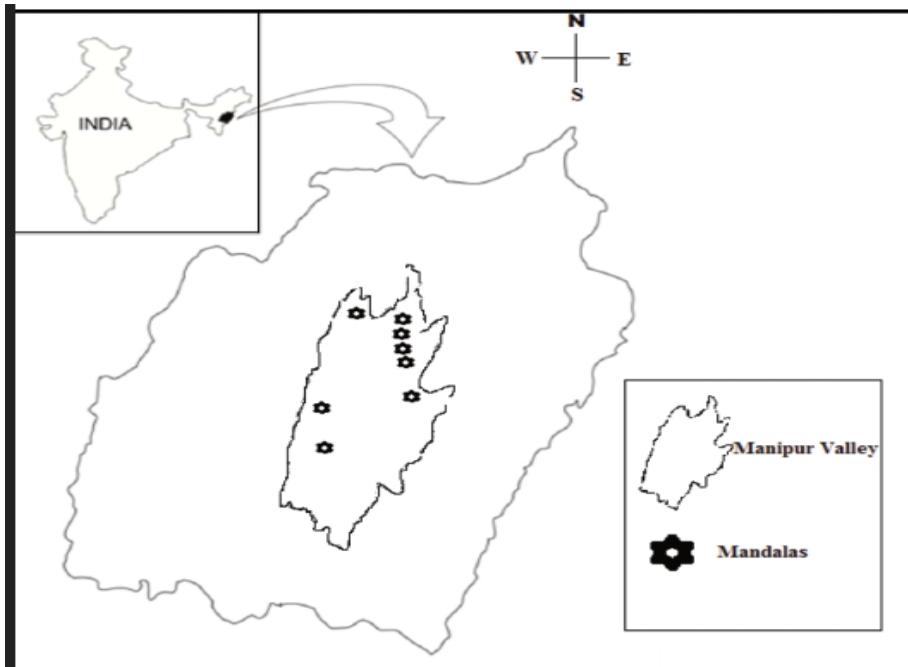
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Appendix:

Figure 1: Map of Manipur and India showing Geographical Location of Eight Mandalas



Source: Somorjit, 2019

Figure 2: First Mandala at Maklang



Source: Somorjit 2018

Figure 3: Second Mandala at Heikakmapal



Source: Somorjit 2018

Figure 4 and 5: Third and Fourth Mandala at Phurju



Source: Somorjit 2018

Figure 6: Fifth Mandala at Sagolmang



Source: Somorjit 2018

Figure 7: Sixth Mandala at Sekmai



Source: Somorjit 2018

Figure 8: Seventh Mandala at Keinou



Source: Somorjit 2019

Figure 9: Eighth Mandala at Nongren



Source: Somorjit 2019