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Leveraging Social Media Influencers to Influx Tourism: Special Reference to North-East India

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ABSTRACT

Tourism dwells upon the basic idea of appealing to the emotional aspects of a person. A person travels and experiences new places, cultures, food, etc., to achieve a sense of emotional satisfaction. Therefore, the idea of tourism is highly influenced by the interests of the people visiting a tourist place. However, to generate that interest among people or for people to be intrigued about a tourist place, there needs to be awareness about that place among people. This makes the marketing strategy of the tourism department extremely important for the recognition and flourishing of tourist spots. Northeast India is said to be very diverse both geographically and culturally. Therefore, it has a huge variety of tourist attractions to offer which consists of holy places, natural ecstasy, cultural dynamics, and even wildlife variety. However, the inflow of tourists is still relatively lesser in this region of India due to a lack of awareness and knowledge about the places in the Northeastern states of India. Social media is one of the most powerful platforms that can reach out to a large number of people to spread awareness. In the past couple of years, North-eastern Indian states have gained popularity through social media and influencers in tourism aspects as more and more influencers are visiting the offbeat places of Northeast India and making their followers aware of these places. This paper aims to recognize the significance of Social Media in boosting the recognition of Tourist Spots in Northeast India and also aims to highlight how the tourism department can be aided by taking up social media influencers into their marketing strategy.

Keywords: *Northeast India Tourism, Tourism Development, Influencer Marketing, Social Media Marketing.*

I. INTRODUCTION

India is widely known for its demographic and cultural diversity, which has the potential to

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offer astonishing tourist attractions. Places like Agra, Delhi, Jaipur, etc., bring out the rich history of India, while places like Varanasi, Haridwar, Puri, Rameswaram, etc., bring out the glory of Indian mythology and culture.

Every year a large number of tourists come to India and visit the Taj Mahal due to its historical significance. However, to understand the historical significance of the Taj Mahal, people need to be aware of the existence of the Taj Mahal. Therefore, Tourism marketing is one of the most essential aspects that the Tourism Department of any state or region ought to keep in mind to flourish in the tourism sector.

The North-Eastern states of India are yet to operate at their full capacity utilization of their tourism potential. The geographical as well as cultural diversity across the states of Northeast India provides a huge dynamic for potential tourism places in this part of the country. However, tourist attractions in this region are significantly less popular compared to other parts of India. The major reason for this is a lack of awareness and lack of reliable information regarding the tourist spots in Northeast India. These two major issues branch off with questions about safety scenarios, accommodation, transportation facilities, etc., for tourists visiting any place in Northeast India. However, Northeast Indian states, in the past couple of years, have successfully sensed their potential in the tourism sector. Many off-beat places in the states of Northeast India are emerging as popular tourist locations among travel influencers and netizens. Social media is playing a big part in the attention that North-eastern states like Meghalaya are receiving due to its astonishing eco-tourism potential.

(A) Review of Literature

- 1) Social media has played an integral part in networking and connecting people and has gained immense popularity since the mid-2000s. In the past couple of decades, an extensive array of scholarly studies has been made on the potential of social media to influence tourist behavior regarding a destination. These studies also highlight the importance of good marketing strategies for tourist destinations, with influencer marketing as one of the most effective, newly emerging marketing techniques. However, considering the potential of Northeast India in tourism, the studies implemented by social media influencers in promoting and marketing of Northeast India in terms of tourism are very limited. *Baber and Baber (2022)* in their study investigated and highlighted the role of social media in influencing the behavior of the general public regarding a tourist destination. The study emphasizes the intention to visit a destination among tourists and links this behavioral stimulus with social media and its influence. The convenience of connecting and

networking among people over social media not only bridges the knowledge gap between people from different parts of the world but also promotes the development of social relationships. *Silaban et al. (2023)* provide a thorough insight into how viewers develop a sense of trust and a Para social relationship with a public figure on social media who share their travel vlogs and this in turn influences the visit intentions of the viewers while planning trips in their lives. In alignment with these findings, *Sobczyk (2023)* also discusses the increase in visibility and engagement of tourist destinations based on the sense of authenticity and reliability of the virtual community created by the social media influencers and gives a thorough review of how social media influencers can be an efficient promotional tool for the tourism industry. Reviewing the impact of social media influencers on the viewers, it can be understood that the implementation of influencer marketing in the travel and tourism industry can serve as an efficient marketing strategy for the respective managers of the tourism department.

- 2) Social media has been a powerful medium of marketing for the tourism industry and India, being the third largest digitally advanced country in the world, has been able to utilize social media for the efficient promotion and marketing of the tourism departments of various states in India. *Gohil (2015)* highlights the achievement of the Madhya Pradesh State Tourism Development Corporation (MPSTDC) due to its social media marketing strategies and efforts. The study highlights how Madhya Pradesh has been able to successfully attain a significant improvement in the state image and its tourism department with the help of social media marketing strategies. Similarly, *Rathore et al. (2017)* highlighted the growth in the tourism sector of Rajasthan due to the active involvement of the Rajasthan Tourism Department on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. The study also highlighted the feedback system of the State Tourism Department of Rajasthan where tourists suggested the provision of more information regarding the tourist destinations. This throws light on the fact that having complete knowledge regarding a tourist destination aids the intention to visit among the general public. With this, we can draw a parallel between the demand for a tourist attraction and the easy availability of information and awareness regarding the tourist attraction.
- 3) Considering the diversity in topography and natural beauty of Northeast India, it is one of the least visited regions in India (*Rizal and Asokan, 2013*). *Chamuah (2022)* highlights the wide potential of tourism in the states of Northeast India and also provides us with a thorough knowledge of issues and challenges regarding tourism in Northeast India. The research clarifies the fact that apart from the various other issues, one of

the major challenges is the communication bottlenecks and lack of easy availability of information for national and international tourists regarding the tourist attractions that Northeast India has to offer.

- 4) Thus, it is evident that the growth of the tourism sector relies heavily on addressing the interests of the general public. Key factors such as providing comprehensive information, raising awareness, ensuring authenticity and reliability, and achieving popularity significantly influence tourists' intentions to visit. The present paper aims to suggest influencer marketing as an efficient marketing strategy for this industry that can prove to be a catalyst for the growth of the Tourism sector in the states of Northeast India. Furthermore, the study also provides a conceptual model of how the government or the tourism marketing authorities of the state can implement this marketing strategy to increase the tourist influx for potential tourist destinations.

(B) Objectives and Methodology

This research is conducted based on the collection and study of significant secondary data. Reputed published works of literature, studies, and articles, as well as data from government sites, have been used for the collection of the secondary data used for the study. For this purpose, the following objectives have been outlined:

- To show how social media is impacting tourist influx in the North-eastern states of India.
- To provide a conceptual framework for influencer marketing strategy.
- To show how social media marketing and influencer marketing as a part of the tourism marketing strategy by the department can aid tourism influx in these states.

II. SOCIAL MEDIA AND TOURISM IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The states of Northeast India have a geographical advantage for offering the people an astonishing experience of mountains and snow, as well as rivers and tropical plain lands. It is also extremely culturally diverse with each of the eight states having people from multiple tribes and ethnicities which brings in a variety of cultural craft works, cuisines, fabric and attire, festivals, languages, etc., and creates a diverse experience for people.

For many years, Northeastern region of India has been referred to as '*the untouched lands*' as many people are still unaware of the beauty and potential of this part of the country. However, social media is changing this dynamic for these states. In the past few years, the tourist influx in the states of Northeast India has seen positive growth. Meghalaya has been showing the most prominent change in its Domestic as well as Foreign tourist visit ratios for the past few years.

The following charts can be used to explain the influx growth of tourists in the states of Northeast India. This table draws a comparison between the data of tourist inflows for the years 2021 and 2022.

Figure 1: Data showing the growth of tourism in North-East, India

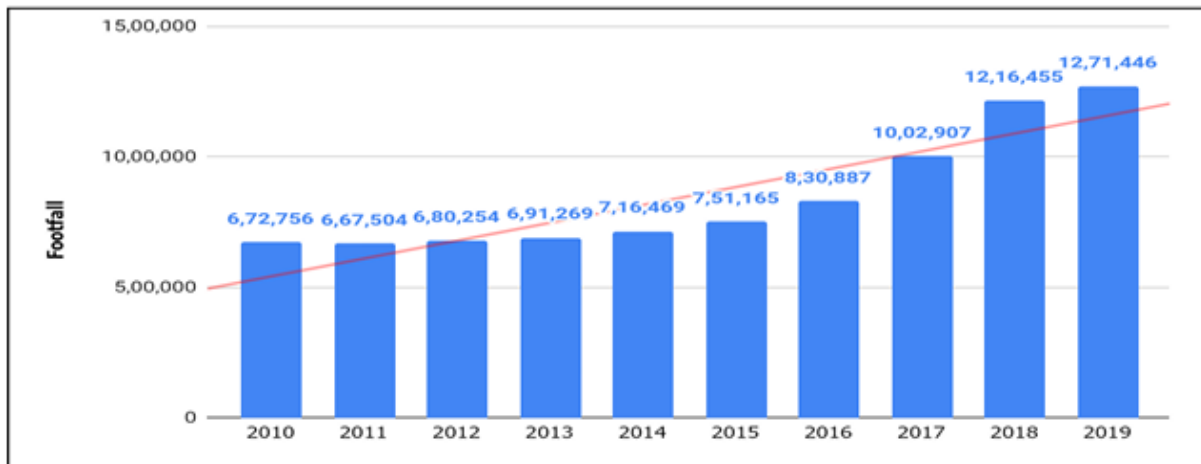
| NE States | 2021 | | 2022 | | Growth Rate | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|
| | Domestic (In Lakhs) | Foreign (In Lakhs) | Domestic (In Lakhs) | Foreign (In Lakhs) | DTV 22/21 | FTV 22/21 |
| Arunachal Pradesh | 1.029 | 0.002 | 2.224 | 0.011 | 116.14 | 479.67 |
| Assam | 14.092 | 0.005 | 83.820 | 0.090 | 494.82 | 1579.29 |
| Manipur | 0.494 | 0.006 | 1.395 | 0.039 | 182.59 | 503.09 |
| Meghalaya | 1.544 | 0.004 | 9.371 | 0.078 | 506.89 | 1791.48 |
| Mizoram | 0.872 | 0.002 | 2.184 | 0.026 | 150.39 | 1015.81 |
| Nagaland | 0.240 | 0.003 | 0.974 | 0.029 | 306.50 | 799.38 |
| Sikkim | 5.117 | 0.115 | 16.256 | 0.686 | 217.70 | 496.50 |
| Tripura | 1.778 | 0.000 | 2.356 | 0.085 | 32.50 | 169760.00 |
| NER | 25.166 | 0.137 | 118.580 | 1.044 | 371.19 | 662.04 |

Source: Indian Tourism Statistics, 2023, Ministry of Tourism

As we can see Meghalaya has shown the highest growth in terms of Domestic Tourist Visits (DTV) and a significantly high growth in the number of Foreign Tourist Visits (FTV) as well. Meghalaya Tourism Department has shown significant growth in the tourism sector of the state and a huge part of their achievement is due to the proper utilization of social media and active organization of annual festivals like the infamous Cherry Blossom Festival. On 22nd February 2024, Minister in charge of Tourism of Meghalaya stated in the legislative assembly that this festival alone brought about 22,991 tourists to Meghalaya during Cherry Blossom 2023 (Meghalaya Public Service Commission, 2024). Meghalaya has also been able to gain attention of the social media users from all over India by organizing various festivals and inviting international artists like Jay Sean, Ne-Yo, Kim Woojin, etc. due to which Meghalaya witnesses

a good number of tourist visits during these festivals.

Figure 2: Following is a chart showing Tourist footfall in Meghalaya from the year 2010 to 2019



Source: Meghalaya Tourism Policy, 2023

The tourist attractions of Meghalaya have come into the limelight due to the rise in popularity of eco-tourism. People interested in travel and tourism or even the general public come across at least one or two video vlogs or short videos of natural tourist attractions of Meghalaya on various social media platforms now and then. This is because of the rising popularity of the tourist potential places in Meghalaya among the travel influencers and the general public. Because of these social media contents more and more people are being aware of what Meghalaya has to offer from a tourism perspective and hence are considering a visit to Meghalaya.

Places like Laitlum, Nongjrong, Living Root Bridge, Phi Phi Falls, Wei Sawdong, Dainthlen Fall, etc. are some of the most popular influencer-recommended tourist spots in Meghalaya at the moment. Apart from Meghalaya, there are a few other places across the states of Northeast India that have gained popularity in the past couple of years due to Social Media and Travel influencers. Some of them are Dzukou Valley in Nagaland, Anini and Ziro in Arunachal Pradesh, Bogamati and Bhairabkunda in BTR Assam, Yumthang in Sikkim, etc.

Just like the above-mentioned places, many other places are slowly coming to light because of people who love exploring and posting on their social networking sites which in turn generates awareness among people about these locations. Apart from states like Meghalaya, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam, there are many other potential eco-tourism places like Mizoram, Tripura, etc. But unfortunately, they are yet to come into the light of Social Media. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that a place can only serve as an excellent tourist spot

when people are aware of that spot, and social media is bridging that gap to a great extent.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA AND TOURISM MARKETING

Certain things come into a person's mind when they are choosing a travel destination. Some of the considerable thoughts, apart from finances, are mostly about how safe the place is, how good the navigation is, how welcoming and hospitable the local people are, how convenient the accommodations are, and how accessible the locations are. Some people might like good sightseeing places but might not prefer trekking or difficult experiences. Moreover, people in general are not big fans of uncertainties.

When an influencer visits a place, they share about it on their social media. Their video logs, blogs, or any means of social media content showcase how they reached the place, what they ate, where they stayed, how they travelled, and most importantly what they accomplished on that trip. It can be a beautiful hilltop view or a refreshing swim in a natural pool. These personal experiences of the influencers clarify the uncertainties in the minds of the public and build a sense of authenticity and reliability. They feel more assured and confident to visit that place after seeing another human being enjoying a tourist spot being well and most importantly safe.

Therefore, investments in influencers can prove to be a good marketing strategy on the part of the government or management authorities of the tourism department to win the authenticity and reliability of the people. Nowadays many resorts and hotel chains go for influencer marketing because it has been seen that the appeal to the general public is huge through influencer marketing.

Many other regions of the world have already started implementing this strategy for destination brand building and growth in the tourism industry. East-Asian countries like Japan and South Korea are a few of the countries that have been gaining wide popularity in the tourism industry on the international level. Tourism organizations of the respective countries have overseas offices that utilize the power of social media and influencer marketing to spread awareness about the tourist attractions of these countries on an international level. The Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) has 32 overseas offices around the globe and constantly keeps organizing campaigns that involve influencers from South Korea as well as foreign influencers to promote tourism in South Korea. The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) also inculcates strategies for the growth of tourism in Japan. Moreover, on 11th September 2023, the Punjab Government announced the 'The Punjab Influencer Empanelment Policy, 2023' which is an initiative taken by the government for the promotion of culture, heritage, and governance of Punjab on social media through the influence of the social media influencers.

Therefore, with the implementation of influencer marketing techniques, the tourist departments of the North-eastern states of India can reach out to a wide variety of people and win the confidence of the public regarding the tourist spots in the Northeast Region. Many private business entities are going for influencer marketing for resorts, restaurants, etc. but the government of the states of Northeast India is yet to actively take part in the same.

IV. CONCEPTUAL MODEL: IMPLEMENTATION OF INFLUENCER MARKETING BY THE TOURISM DEPARTMENT FOR BOGAMATI, BTR, ASSAM

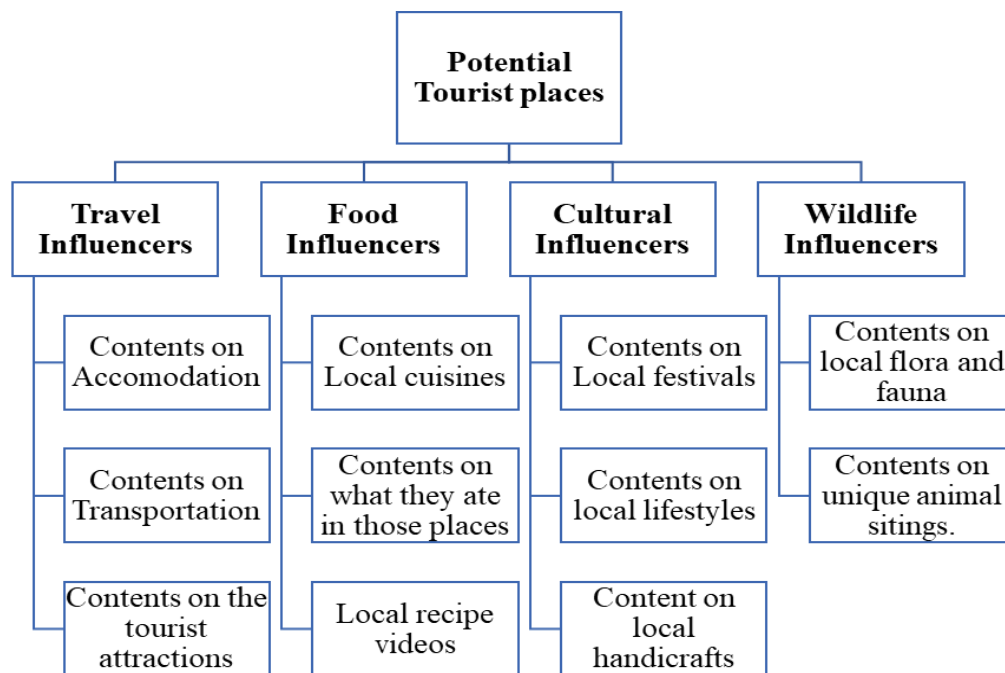
Assam Government has been spending a huge budget for the development of the Tourism Sector in Assam. There have been many initiatives taken by the Tourism Department of Assam like 'Swadesh Darshan 2.0' implemented in Jorhat and Kokrajhar, 'Promotion & Development of Tea Tourism Infrastructure in Assam', 'Amar Alohi Rural Homestay Scheme', UTTORON Scheme, etc. Furthermore, the proposed amount of allocation to the Tourism Department for the year 2024-25 is estimated to be ₹100.86 Crores for further development in Tourism infrastructure and attractions in Assam with an emphasis on improvement of online booking systems and accessibility. Assam Government has been putting in their immense interest and efforts for the growth of the Tourism department, identifying the potential tourist attractions in Assam. However, a crucial subject seems to have remained unnoticed by the policymakers, the generation of intention among tourists for increasing the inflow of tourists. This is where marketing techniques play a crucial role.

The paper proposes this conceptual model demonstrating how the government can implement Influencer Marketing techniques for the generation of intention among the general public to visit a potential tourist attraction. To aid the study of this conceptual model, we have taken **Bogamati Picnic Spot** located in Bodoland Territorial Region, Assam, as our Potential Tourist Attraction.

Bogamati is a naturally aesthetic and picturesque place located in the Indo-Bhutan border Area. Bogamati has been gaining popularity in the past couple of years due to its locational advantage, exciting outdoor activity opportunities, and wildlife significance. However, despite its breathtaking landscapes and development in infrastructure, the increase in the inflow of tourists visiting Bogamati will witness an increase only when the spot is known to people and the intention to visit is generated among them.

From the following figure we can understand how the tourism department of Assam can bring places like Bogamati into the view of the general public:

Figure 3: Conceptual strategy chart for promoting various areas of interest of a potential tourist destination with the help of social media influencers.



Source: Developed by the Authors (2024)

Considering Bogamati Picnic Spot as the potential tourist attraction for this study, the Assam government can appoint or sponsor a selected set of influencers to cover the different areas of this potential tourist spot. The major areas that can be covered are Travel Influencers, Food Influencers, Cultural Influencers, and Wildlife Influencers.

- **Travel Influencers:** The individuals or groups of individuals creating content specifically on travel and tourism on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, etc. have been gaining immense popularity due to their intriguing yet informative content on their travel experiences. A group of travel influencers can be sponsored by the government to visit Bogamati and create video logs, blogs, or even Instagram reels where they include content related to their accommodation, transportation, activities, etc.
- **Food Influencers:** The influencers promoting the food culture in and around India have been really popular due to the rich food culture in India. This group of influencers, popularly known as the "Foodies" who promote the food culture of various parts of India can be appointed or sponsored to promote the local Bodo cuisine by creating content related to the food culture in and around Bogamati.
- **Cultural Influencers:** Considering the immense diversity in tribes of Assam, let alone

India as a whole, the cultural diversity of India has always been a great topic of interest among people. Influencers who create content on social media platforms to promote the cultures and lifestyles of various groups in India can be appointed or sponsored to visit the Bodoland Territorial Region and create content on local lifestyles or attires like Dokhna, Aronai, etc. They can also promote the local handicrafts of Bodoland and festivals like the annual music festival of Bodoland, Dwijing Festival.

- **Wildlife Influencers:** Wildlife and nature are an integral part of all the states of Northeast India. Therefore, influencers who use their social media platforms to present the general public with content on wildlife and nature can potentially be a good marketing tool for the states of Northeast India. Bogamati has a great locational advantage in terms of wildlife and nature as it is situated very close to National Parks like Manas and Raimona, and Wildlife Sanctuaries like Barnadi and Chakrasila. These protected areas are famous for their rich flora and fauna and opportunities for exploring wildlife activities. Therefore, appointing or sponsoring Wildlife Influencers to visit Bogamati and their wildlife experiences in and around Bogamati can help the government increase social media engagement for this place.

In this manner, an intention to visit this tourist attraction can be created amongst the general public by catering to their specific area of interest.

V. CONCLUSION

Northeast India, even if it is very rich in biodiversity and geographical diversity, is still not well connected with the rest of the world when it comes to awareness and knowledge about the eight states of Northeast India. The easiest and the most efficient way to reach out to the world in today's generation is the internet. Putting the immense ability and power of Social Networking sites into best use the Tourism Departments of the Northeastern states can develop an excellent marketing and promotional strategy and connect with a lot of people. The sponsorships or collaborations with influencers can help the tourism departments to reach out to a larger audience according to people's travel preferences due to the social media algorithms. This strategy can aid the tourism managers or policymakers to generate awareness regarding the potential tourist attractions in the states of Northeast India at a large scale and the source of the information the general public receives will be more authentic compared to any other tourism ads posted by the departments themselves. For instance, if an influencer from Rajasthan visits Mizoram and makes a travel vlog on YouTube, the appeal and awareness generation created by his vlog to the people of Rajasthan will be a more unbiased, authentic and reliable source

compared to any other ad posted by the Mizoram Tourism Department. Therefore, this marketing strategy can overall aid the influx of tourists in the states of Northeast India and prove to be a catalyst for the growth of the Tourism sector in the states of Northeast India.

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