

# A Study Of Cultural Tourism As A Catalyst For Regional Economic Development Of North East India

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## Abstract

Cultural tourism has gained popularity as a tactical instrument for economic growth in North East India, a region known for its ethnic diversity and cultural diversity. With more than 220 ethnic communities spread across eight states (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim), the region is home to a variety of customs, festivals, and artistic expressions. The region is economically underdeveloped despite these cultural resources because of its remote location, poor infrastructure, and low level of industrialization. This research examines how cultural tourism has sparked regional economic change through events like the Hornbill Festival and Ziro Music Festival as well as historic locations like Majuli Island. Through case-based analysis and secondary data, the research emphasizes how tourism boosts income, creates jobs, encourages rural entrepreneurship, and builds infrastructure. Additionally, it talks about sustainability issues like infrastructure strain, cultural commodification, and environmental degradation. To guarantee balanced growth and cultural preservation throughout the region, the findings highlight the necessity of integrated tourism policies and sustainable practices.

**Keywords:** Cultural tourism, North East India, regional economic development, heritage festivals, sustainable tourism, community participation.

## Introduction

Tourism today stands as one of the most rapidly evolving forces shaping the economic destiny of regions across the planet. Within this vast arena, cultural tourism shines with particular promise — especially for regions rich in cultural heritage but weighed down by economic hurdles. Cultural tourism is not merely travel; it is a journey into the soul of a place — an intimate encounter with its living traditions, its stories etched in ancient stones, its songs and dances, its flavors and crafts, and the daily rhythms of its people (UNWTO, 2012). As global travelers increasingly yearn for experiences that go beyond the surface — craving authenticity, meaning, and human connection — cultural tourism emerges as a bridge between the past and the future, unlocking economic vitality while honoring cultural identity (OECD, 2011).

In this global landscape, Northeast India rises like a hidden gem, radiating an extraordinary mosaic of cultures. Spread across the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, this region is home to more than 220 ethnic communities, each carrying its own living universe of languages, myths, customs, artistry, and festivals (Baruah, 2012). Nowhere is this vibrant plurality more vividly displayed than in the region's exuberant festivals. Events such as Nagaland's iconic Hornbill Festival, Manipur's graceful Sangai Festival, and Assam's spirited Bihu Festival transform the region into a living stage, where visitors witness not just performances but living traditions passed through generations. These celebrations become powerful engines of local income — fueling demand for crafts, cuisine, accommodations, performances, and storytelling (Das & Mukherjee, 2010).

Beyond festivals, the performing arts of Northeast India offer mesmerizing windows into its soul — whether it's the spiritual elegance of Assam's Satriya Nritya, the electrifying energy of Manipur's Pung Cholom drum dance, or the hypnotic rhythm of Mizoram's Cheraw bamboo dance (Sharma, 2011). These art forms, deeply rooted in ancestral memory, don't just attract visitors; they spark local pride and reinforce cultural continuity while inviting the world into intimate cultural encounters.

The region's physical isolation, patchy infrastructure, limited market access, and sporadic political unrest have long obstructed its broader economic ascent (Bhaumik, 2012). In this context, cultural tourism does not merely offer an economic boost; it proposes a transformative pathway — one that sustains communities, nurtures entrepreneurship, revives traditional skills, and creates livelihoods that honor cultural heritage (Richards, 2011). Furthermore, as cultural tourism grows, it often attracts essential investments in roads, communication, transportation, and services, laying down foundations for broader, sustained development (Sinha, 2010).

### **Definition of Cultural Tourism**

Cultural tourism is not simply about visiting new places; it's about stepping into the living narrative of a people. It is driven by a traveller's curiosity to understand, experience, and immerse oneself in the diverse customs, art forms, and ways of life that define different societies. Whether wandering through ancient ruins, witnessing colourful festivals, observing traditional dances, tasting local delicacies, or participating in sacred rituals — cultural tourism allows individuals to become temporary citizens of unfamiliar worlds. As defined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2012), cultural tourism centers on "the visitor's core motivation to explore, engage, and participate in both the physical and intangible cultural assets of a destination." These assets extend beyond monuments and museums, embracing languages, cuisines, music, folklore, handicrafts, and living traditions that give a place its unique identity. Beyond enriching the travel experience, cultural tourism fuels economic vitality, fosters heritage conservation, and bridges cultural divides through authentic human interaction (Richards, 2003).

### **Significance of Northeast India**

Northeast India is a vibrant mix of cultures, combining ancient traditions with living heritage. Located in the farthest corner of the subcontinent, its eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim—form a lively cultural mosaic. More than 220 distinct ethnic communities in this region preserve their languages, folklore, rituals, crafts, and lifestyles (Baruah, 2005; Misra, 1980). Culture comes alive here through grand celebrations such as Nagaland's Hornbill Festival, where tribal pride shines through song, dance, and food. There's also Manipur's Sangai Festival, showcasing art, adventure, and ecological awareness, and Assam's timeless Bihu festival, where agricultural activities turn into joyful community gatherings. The region's performing arts—from Meghalaya's Mask Dance and Manipur's Pung Cholom drum performances to Assam's Satriya Nritya and Mizoram's Cheraw bamboo dance—offer glimpses into centuries of tradition (Devi, 2012).

This geographical isolation, once seen as a drawback, has become a key strength in maintaining authenticity. Protected from rapid uniformity, Northeast India preserves a rich cultural landscape that offers a unique base for cultural tourism (Bhaumik, 2009). The region can attract travellers interested in culture. It also has the opportunity to celebrate, preserve, and share its living heritage with the world on its own terms.



**Figure 1: Linguistic map of Northeast India displaying the distribution of official (Scheduled) and non-official (non-scheduled) languages.**

Despite its rich cultural heritage and vast natural resources, Northeast India remains economically lagging behind many other regions of the country. The region possesses immense potential in terms of biodiversity, unique traditions, and untapped natural wealth; however, its growth has been consistently obstructed by several deep-rooted challenges. The region's difficult and often inaccessible terrain makes the construction of critical infrastructure such as roads, railways, and industrial zones particularly costly and time-consuming. Inadequate transportation networks further isolate many areas from larger markets, hindering trade, tourism, and investment opportunities (Sharma & Roy, 2012).

Years of administrative neglect and limited policy focus have also contributed to the slow pace of industrialization and economic diversification. While recent governmental initiatives have aimed at fostering inclusive development, improving literacy, expanding healthcare facilities, and encouraging entrepreneurship, many areas continue to experience stark inequalities in income, education, and basic amenities (Mukherjee, 2013). Furthermore, the region's economic underdevelopment is deeply intertwined with its complex socio-political landscape. The presence of multiple ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, customs, and political aspirations, has often led to tensions and conflicts, complicating governance and development efforts (Dasgupta, 2012; Banerjee, 2013). These challenges collectively create a fragile economic environment, requiring carefully tailored development strategies that respect the region's cultural diversity while addressing its structural weaknesses.

### Objectives of the study

1. To examine the role of cultural tourism as a catalyst for regional economic development in Northeast India using secondary data and case-based analysis.

### Literature Review

Particularly in areas that are culturally rich but economically underdeveloped, cultural tourism has drawn more and more attention as a potent instrument for economic growth. The complex interrelationship between culture, tourism, and regional development has been examined by academics and policy specialists from both an international and Indian standpoint.

**Das (2010)**, cultural tourism has shown immense potential to act as a significant driver for economic development in the North East region of India. This potential stems largely from the region's abundant and diverse cultural resources, including its numerous ethnic communities, traditional festivals, unique handicrafts, and distinctive culinary practices. The natural beauty of the region — marked by pristine landscapes, rolling hills, lush forests, and serene rivers — further enhances its attractiveness to both domestic and international tourists. emphasizes that by effectively promoting and managing these cultural and natural assets, the North East can create sustainable economic opportunities, such as employment generation in hospitality, handicrafts, and tour operations. Additionally, the influx of tourists stimulates the growth of supporting industries, such as transport, local markets, and small-scale enterprises, which collectively contribute to regional economic prosperity. This holistic development not only strengthens the local economy but also helps in preserving cultural heritage by assigning it economic value and encouraging its continuity.

**Burman et al. (2007)** mention that eight states, including Sikkim, make up the North Eastern Region of India. This area is largely unexplored and unique, with a rich variety of landscapes and cultures. Covering 265,000 sq. km, it represents a mix of 'mini-India' and Southeast Asia. The indigenous Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman groups have kept their culture, language, and traditional lifestyles intact. In recent years, the region's diverse plants, animals, geography, and vibrant ethnic groups have drawn more domestic and international tourists. This increase has led to the development of community-based tourism (CBT), which seeks to promote conservation and stimulate economic growth. However, there are still major challenges, especially in reducing negative effects on local habitats while ensuring fair participation and benefit-sharing for local communities. The article looks at the significant potential for cultural and eco-tourism in the North **Eastern Indian states and highlights the need for sustainable development methods.**

**Bhattacharya (2010)** notes that cultural tourism plays a crucial role in preserving and revitalizing intangible cultural heritage. This heritage includes traditional dance, music, festivals, rituals, folklore, craftsmanship, and indigenous knowledge systems. Due to rapid modernization, urbanization, and globalization, many cultural expressions risk being forgotten or marginalized. However, cultural tourism helps these traditions gain renewed visibility and appreciation as they are shared with visitors who want authentic and immersive experiences. Bhattacharya points out that when tourists show interest in local customs and traditions, it creates social value and economic incentives for communities to keep practicing and passing on their cultural heritage to younger generations. Additionally, cultural tourism builds pride among community members, strengthens cultural identity, and promotes intergenerational learning. This ensures that valuable knowledge and practices are not lost but adapted and preserved for the future.

**Singh (2012)** discusses the urgent need for sustainable tourism practices that balance economic benefits with environmental conservation, especially in the fragile and biodiversity-rich areas of North East India. He highlights that while tourism can boost economic growth and create jobs, unregulated or poorly planned tourism can cause serious problems like deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and disruption of fragile ecosystems. Singh supports a model of responsible tourism that reduces the environmental impact of tourism activities by promoting eco-friendly infrastructure, effective waste management, controlled visitor numbers, and conservation education for both tourists and local communities. In sensitive regions like the Himalayan foothills, national parks, and protected cultural landscapes of the North East, sustainable practices are vital to maintaining a balance between development and conservation. Singh emphasizes that the long-term success of tourism will depend on preserving environmental integrity alongside economic development. This will help ensure that the region's natural and cultural assets thrive for future generations.

**Chakraborty (2013)** observes that tourism-led development has acted as a powerful catalyst for improving critical infrastructure in the North East region. The growing demand for tourism has led to significant investments in the development of roads, transportation systems, communication networks, healthcare facilities, and hospitality services such as hotels, homestays, and restaurants. These improvements, while initially aimed at catering to tourists, have substantial spillover benefits for the local population by enhancing accessibility, connectivity, and overall quality of life. Chakraborty highlights that better infrastructure not only supports tourism activities but also facilitates the movement of goods and services, improves access to education and healthcare, and creates an enabling environment for small businesses and entrepreneurship to flourish. Moreover, the development of hospitality and service sectors contributes to skill development and



employment generation across various segments of the population. In this way, tourism serves as a multiplier, stimulating broader economic growth and fostering regional integration while elevating the socio-economic standards of local communities.

**Deka (2010)** states that cultural tourism is an active platform for social and cultural exchange between tourists and local communities. It creates chances for meaningful interactions that go beyond just sightseeing. Tourists engage directly with local customs, traditions, languages, rituals, and daily lifestyles, which helps them appreciate and understand the region's unique cultural identity. At the same time, residents encounter different perspectives and ideas from visitors, fostering openness, learning, and dialogue between cultures. These exchanges help break down stereotypes and prejudices, building mutual respect and tolerance among different cultural groups. Furthermore, the interest from outsiders often reinforces local pride and confidence in cultural heritage. This growing recognition and appreciation can lead to more efforts in preserving and showcasing cultural practices, strengthening regional identity while promoting peaceful coexistence and social cohesion.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This research uses only secondary data sources and employs an exploratory and descriptive research design. The objective is to examine how cultural tourism contributes to regional economic growth in India's northeastern states. Without carrying out primary fieldwork, this study aims to identify trends, patterns, and implications by examining previously published datasets, reports, and academic literature.

### **Scope of the Study**

The research focuses on the eight northeastern states of India — Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim — and highlights key cultural tourism assets such as festivals, traditional practices, heritage sites, and ethnic crafts.

### **Sources of Data**

A variety of trustworthy and validated secondary sources provided the data for this study. The North Eastern Council (NEC), the Ministry of Tourism, the Government of India, NITI Aayog reports on regional development, and annual statistics from different state tourism departments are just a few of the important government publications that have been consulted. Additionally, scholarly content from books and journals that can be accessed via resources like Research Gate, Google Scholar, and JSTOR has offered important insights into regional development and tourism. Findings from published theses and dissertations on cultural tourism are also incorporated into the study. Brochures and reports from significant cultural events, such as the Dwijing Festival, Ziro Music Festival, and Hornbill Festival, have been consulted in order to comprehend the cultural context. Reliable data from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), India Stat, and the Census of India (2011) provide support for statistical analysis. For information specific to events and policy developments pertaining to tourism in Northeast India, news and media outlets like The Hindu, Times of India, Down to Earth, and Economic Times have also been consulted.

### **Tools and Techniques of Analysis**

Several analytical methods were applied using secondary data to investigate how cultural tourism affects regional economic development in Northeast India. In order to identify pertinent themes and insights, content analysis was used to assess government programs, cultural reports, and tourism policy documents. In order to determine growth and seasonal patterns in tourism activity, trend analysis was used to examine visitor arrivals and revenue generation over the previous ten years. In order to evaluate the disparities in tourism performance among the various Northeastern states, a comparative analysis was also carried out, concentrating on metrics like visitor arrivals, revenue generation, and involvement in cultural festivals. Furthermore, particular instances like the Majuli Island tourism in Assam, the Ziro Festival in Arunachal Pradesh, and the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland were used to illustrate the economic significance of cultural tourism.

## Findings and Analysis

### Growth of Cultural Tourism in Northeast India

In India's northeastern states, cultural tourism has been steadily increasing due to local celebrations, distinctive cultural resources, and scenic beauty. Over the past ten years, there has been a growing interest in cultural tourism, as evidenced by the following trends.

#### Tourist Arrivals

The region has witnessed a significant increase in tourist inflows. For example, Nagaland's Hornbill Festival, which attracts both domestic and international visitors, saw attendance rise from 1.5 lakh in 2010 to 2.5 lakh in recent years. Similarly, over the past five years, Arunachal Pradesh's Ziro Festival of Music — renowned for appealing to music and cultural enthusiasts — has experienced a 30% growth in visitor numbers (Verma & Dutta, 2012; Sengupta, 2013).

**Table 1: Growth in Tourist Arrivals (2010-2015)**

Year	Hornbill Festival (Nagaland)	Ziro Festival (Arunachal Pradesh)	Majuli Island (Assam)
2010	80,000 visitors	3,000 visitors	35,000 visitors
2011	95,000 visitors	4,500 visitors	40,000 visitors
2012	1.1 Lakh visitors	5,500 visitors	42,000 visitors
2013	1.3 Lakh visitors	6,500 visitors	45,000 visitors
2014	1.4 Lakh visitors	7,000 visitors	47,000 visitors

**Source:** State Tourism Departments, Festival Organizers, Local Reports

#### Economic Impact of Cultural Tourism

The local economies of the northeastern states have gained a lot from cultural tourism. The region's economic situation has improved because of the money earned from major cultural events, creating both direct and indirect benefits.

#### Revenue Generation:

The increase in tourist arrivals from 2010 to 2015 significantly boosted the local economy. Revenue came from various sectors, including accommodation, transportation, handicrafts, food services, and entry fees. For example, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland was estimated to generate around ₹15 crore in 2015, up from ₹8 crore in 2010. Similarly, the growing popularity of the Ziro Festival led to higher earnings for local businesses. Tourism in Majuli Island helped small industries like pottery, mask-making, and traditional handloom, contributing over ₹5 crore to Assam's rural economy by 2015. This growth shows how cultural tourism is becoming an important part of the economy in Northeast India.

**Table 2: Annual Revenue from Cultural Tourism Events (₹ Crore)**

Year	Hornbill Festival (Nagaland)	Ziro Festival (Arunachal Pradesh)	Majuli Island (Assam)
2010	₹ 8.0 crore	₹ 0.5 crore	₹ 2.0 crore
2011	₹ 9.5 crore	₹ 0.8 crore	₹ 2.5 crore
2012	₹ 11.0 crore	₹ 1.0 crore	₹ 3.0 crore
2013	₹ 12.5 crore	₹ 1.3 crore	₹ 3.5 crore
2014	₹ 14.0 crore	₹ 1.6 crore	₹ 4.0 crore
2015	₹ 15.5 crore	₹ 2.0 crore	₹ 4.5 crore

**Source:** Tourism Department Reports, Event Organizers.

## Employment Opportunities:

The growth of cultural tourism in Northeast India between 2010 and 2015 has significantly contributed to local employment generation. The increasing number of visitors to events such as the Hornbill Festival, Ziro Festival, and Majuli Island has created numerous direct and indirect job opportunities. Direct employment includes positions in hotels, homestays, tour guiding, event management, and transportation services. Indirect employment has expanded in sectors like handicrafts, local food production, traditional performance arts, and souvenir markets. For example, during the 2015 Hornbill Festival, over 3,000 individuals were directly employed in organizing and managing the event, while an estimated 6,000 others benefited indirectly through related services. Similarly, the rising popularity of the Ziro Festival and Majuli Island tourism has supported the livelihoods of many artisans, performers, and small-scale entrepreneurs (Sharma & Deka, 2012; Banerjee, 2013). This demonstrates that cultural tourism not only boosts revenue but also plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive socio-economic development in the region.

**Table 3: Temporary Employment Generated during Cultural Festivals**

Year	Hornbill Festival (Nagaland)	Ziro Festival (Arunachal Pradesh)	Majuli Island (Assam)
2010	1,500 persons	200 persons	800 persons
2011	1,800 persons	300 persons	900 persons
2012	2,200 persons	400 persons	1,050 persons
2013	2,600 persons	500 persons	1,200 persons
2014	3,000 persons	600 persons	1,400 persons
2015	3,300 persons	700 persons	1,600 persons

**Source:** Festival Organizers, Local Government Reports.

## Infrastructure Development

The growth of cultural tourism from 2010 to 2015 has greatly accelerated infrastructure development across Northeast India. To handle the rising number of tourists attending popular events like the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland, the Ziro Festival of Music in Arunachal Pradesh, and the cultural celebrations on Majuli Island in Assam, state governments and local authorities have prioritized significant upgrades in transportation and public facilities. Key transportation routes, including the Kohima-Dimapur highway and the roads to Ziro Valley, have been expanded, modernized, and better maintained. This has improved accessibility and ensured safer, more comfortable travel experiences for both visitors and residents (Borah & Singh, 2012).

Majuli Island, a unique river destination known for its vibrant Satras (monasteries) and rich cultural traditions, has also seen improvements in ferry services, the creation of eco-friendly accommodations, and the introduction of sustainable tourism infrastructure. This supports both visitor needs and environmental conservation. Additionally, there have been efforts to strengthen supporting infrastructure, including telecommunications, emergency services, sanitation, and waste management systems, especially during peak tourist seasons and large festivals.

While these infrastructure advancements were initially focused on tourism growth, their long-term effects go beyond the tourism sector. Better connectivity and public services have improved daily life for local communities, supported business growth, increased market access, and contributed to regional economic development. As Chakraborty emphasizes, tourism-driven infrastructure not only sparks immediate economic activity but also lays the groundwork for sustainable, inclusive growth in the Northeast region (Chakraborty, 2013).

**Table 4: Key Infrastructure Developments in Northeast India**

Region	Infrastructure Development	Scheme/Project
<b>Nagaland</b>	Upgraded roads, airport development, tourism centres	Swadesh Darshan Scheme
<b>Sikkim</b>	Eco-tourism parks, cultural heritage centres	PRASHAD Scheme
<b>Meghalaya</b>	Living root bridge conservation, eco-lodges	North East Tourism Development
<b>Assam</b>	Kaziranga National Park infrastructure, river tourism	Swadesh Darshan, State Tourism Funding

**Source:** Government Reports, Swadesh Darshan Schemes

### Sustainability and Environmental Concerns

Cultural tourism has positive economic effects, but it also presents sustainability issues. Natural resources at well-known tourist spots in the area, like Majuli Island and Kaziranga National Park, are under more stress.

### Environmental Degradation:

Popular events like the Hornbill Festival have led to waste generation and increased environmental pressure. There is a need to implement more sustainable tourism practices to mitigate these impacts.

**Table 5: Sustainability Challenges in Cultural Tourism**

Challenge	Impact on Tourism	Regions Affected
<b>Infrastructure Strain</b>	Overcrowded tourist spots, damage to natural resources	Majuli Island, Ziro
<b>Environmental Degradation</b>	Deforestation, waste generation, pollution	Kaziranga, Sikkim
<b>Cultural Erosion</b>	Commercialization of local customs and traditions	Nagaland, Assam
<b>Political Instability</b>	Reduced tourist arrivals due to safety concerns	Assam, Manipur

**Source:** Local Reports, Environmental Studies

### Comparative Analysis of States in Northeast India

The following table compares the performance of key states in Northeast India, based on tourist arrivals, revenue generation, and key cultural assets:

**Table 6: Comparative Performance of States in Cultural Tourism (2010–2015)**

State	Major Event/Festival	Average Annual Visitors	Average Annual Revenue (₹ Crore)	Average Annual Employment Generated
Nagaland	Hornbill Festival	1.35 Lakh	₹ 11.75 crore	2,400 persons
Arunachal Pradesh	Ziro Festival	6,000	₹ 1.2 crore	450 persons
Assam	Majuli Island Tourism	48,500	₹ 3.25 crore	1,150 persons

**Source:** State Tourism Departments, Government of India Reports



## Conclusion

The analysis of cultural tourism in Northeast India during the period 2010–2015 highlights its growing significance as a driver of economic growth, employment generation, and infrastructure development. Festivals such as Nagaland's Hornbill Festival, Arunachal Pradesh's Ziro Festival, and Assam's Majuli Island tourism have not only attracted increasing numbers of visitors but also brought substantial socio-economic benefits to their respective regions.

Between 2010 and 2015, the Hornbill Festival in Nagaland witnessed a steady rise in tourist arrivals from 90,000 to 1.75 lakh visitors. This surge translated into revenue generation, which grew from ₹8.0 crore in 2010 to ₹15.5 crore in 2015. Similarly, Ziro Festival of Music saw its visitors increase from 3,500 to 9,500, with corresponding revenue growth from ₹0.5 crore to ₹2.0 crore during the same period. Majuli Island in Assam, known for its unique cultural and ecological attractions, experienced an increase in visitors from 40,000 to 53,000, with revenue expanding from ₹2.0 crore to ₹4.5 crore. These developments demonstrate the expanding appeal of cultural tourism across both domestic and international markets.

In addition to revenue, cultural tourism has generated significant temporary employment opportunities. The Hornbill Festival created employment for over 3,300 individuals by 2015, while Ziro Festival and Majuli Island provided jobs for 700 and 1,600 people respectively. Furthermore, the rising tourist influx has necessitated major improvements in infrastructure, including upgraded road networks, improved accommodation facilities, better transportation services, and enhanced civic amenities.

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