

Chapter 4

Implication of SASEC Tourism Initiatives on North Eastern States of India: A Descriptive Analysis – SASEC Tourism

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ABSTRACT

India's North Eastern Region (NER) stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas in the eastern range and is surrounded by international borders with countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, China (Tibet Autonomous Region), Nepal, and Myanmar. The landlocked region is constrained by a brief spell of insurgency, and dismal unemployment has affected the region's progress since 1947. The advent of the Look East Policy coupled with a number of South Asia sub-regional arrangements with neighboring countries opened a "Pandora's Box" for this region. The SASEC initiatives of ADB helped to improve the status of tourism and infrastructure, including roads, air connectivity, and also opened cross-border land routes and roads within the North East (NE). The present study takes stock of tourism development from a sustainability perspective and examines the implementation of the SASEC tourism project in eight NE States of India with a view to suggest priority areas for action for promotion of tourism in this region.

INTRODUCTION

As per WTTC reports (2013), tourism is a high impact industry, a major generator of jobs in the service sector compared to manufacturing and agriculture as demonstrated by its rate of growth and employment around the world. Its total contribution comprised 9 per cent global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (i.e. US \$ 6.6 trillion) and generated over 260 million jobs—1 in 11 of the world total jobs. According to World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2013, India ranks 11th in the Asia-Pacific region and 65th globally out 140 economies ranked on the travel and tourism competitiveness index. The total tourists' visits to India have increased at a rate of 16.3 per cent per annum from 577

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million tourists in 2008 to 1057 million in 2012. Government of India (2013) suggests that international tourists arrivals pegged at 7.5 million in 2013 expected to witness an annual growth rate of 6.2 per cent over the next decade.

Tourism routes are key driver of regional development and integration and the volume of growth of world tourism, over the years, suggests that the sector deserves a higher degree of attention than it receives in South Asia. Amongst the sub-regional economic initiatives, promotion of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region as a common tourist destination by enhancing the role of private sector, human resource development, promotion of South Asian identity through tourism and also development of niche segment can augur well for promotion of SASEC tourism in the region. The ADB promoted SASEC initiatives involves four countries, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal geographically covering Eastern Himalayan- Bay of Bengal Sub-region of South Asia. In India, it covers West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and eight North Eastern States (NESs) namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim.

The SASEC program of ADB (2010) was designed to improve the status of five participating countries, namely, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Srilanka which essentially covers the landlocked countries/states of this sub-region. The program fundamentally includes five key sectors i.e. transport and communication, energy and power, tourism, environment and trade, investment and private sector participation. The thrust area of the project was to improve connectivity and destination infrastructure for sub-regional tourism development. The aim of the project was to promote joint development of tourism infrastructure along select multi-country tourism circuits that combine the region as whole into a marketable sub-regional tourism products The entire SASEC program of ADB is divided into nine tourism sub-circuits as a part of its collaborative effort. A list of such programs is portrayed in Table 1.

Present study covers eight NESs of SASEC region on the premise of promoting tourism as an engine of economic growth for this landlocked region. Study does not essentially follow ADB promoted SASEC tourism for NESs alone, rather it takes into all such initiatives of cross border tourism promotion which traverse through NER of India.

Table 1. SASEC Tourism Sub-circuits of ADB

No of Projects	SASEC Sub-Circuits	Countries Involved
1	Footstep of Lord Buddha Sub-circuit	Bangladesh, India, Nepal
2	Nepal Ecotourism Road Sub-circuit	Nepal
3	North East Himalayan Sub-circuit	India
4	Bangladesh India Heritage Highway Sub-circuit	Bangladesh, India
5	Bhutan-India Sub-circuit	Bhutan, India
6	Brahmaputra River Cruise Sub-circuit	India
7	Great Himalayan Trail Sub-circuit	India, Nepal
8	Srilanka Cultural Triangle Sub-circuit	Srilanka
9	Srilanka Southern Ecotourism Triangle Sub-circuit	Srilanka

Source: ADB 2010.

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