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Prospects of pilgrims tourism in Biswanath and Gohpur sub-division, Biswanath District, Assam

Hridaya Hazarika

hridaya.hazarika@rediffmail.com

Chaiduar College, Gohpur, Assam

ABSTRACT

Tourism is emerging as the important global industry in the 21st and for the last four decades or so a tourism revolution has been sweeping the world. As compared to other parts of our country, Assam is in a unique position with regard to the choices it can offer to a tourist, simply because her diversity of culture, green natural beauty and environment. Apart from living in the lap of nature, the State also has a rich heritage and offers the erudite and even the ordinary traveler a fascinating glimpse into the pages of Indian history and its mystical religious centers. Religion is an emotional and very much sensitive subject for men ever. Almost all the major religion of the world has its own mysteries, wonders, myth and facts which restricts and controls men for continuation of better life and spiritual upliftment. Like many other parts of Assam, Gohpur and Biswanath sub-division in Sonitpur district are the two places of assimilation of diverse ethnic people with rich cultural life. In both the sub-divisions there are a number of mystical religious places where in lies the good prospect of pilgrims' tourism. Among these Biswanath Ghat, Gangmou Than, Kalyanee Than, Basudev Dou, Kam-Dewal, Bor-Kalika Than and few others has the historical importance and deep religious faith for the local people. The main fact is that, till today, no significant planning approach has been taken up to develop these tourist destinations. It is because of the ignorance and negligence, these places of good prospects are still depriving of wide recognition and due importance. This paper attempts to draw the attention of the people of our country for enjoying the spiritual food and to invite interest and thereby make the places as source and centre for pilgrims tourism.

Keywords: Pilgrims Tourism, mystical religious centers, Biswanath Ghat, Gangmou Than, Kalyanee Than, Basudev Dou, Kam-Dewal, Bor-Kalika Than.

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The objective of this paper is to address some tourism issues such as :

- Establish a strong sense of interest towards the attractive places of local identity.
- Identify few prospective areas of improvement.
- Help in establishing some small scale enterprise that may meet visitors' expectations who enjoyed visit to Assam.
- To encourage self employment.
- Identify the issues facing pilgrim's tourism and tourism related infrastructure the proposed areas.
- Evaluate the facilities available in the prospective areas.
- Identify the linkages for tourism industry, heritage, and adventure sports in Assam.
- Glorify the State's cultural values and natural resources.
- To strengthen tourism industry of our state.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is completely descriptive and based on secondary data collection. Secondary data were collected partly by observations made during site visits and partly by consulting with the local people who are mostly concerned with the proposed sites. Besides, some data were taken from the books, articles and journals.

3. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerging as a very big contributor to a nation's total economy and development. Besides fulfilling the adventurous spirit, men travel in search of enjoying the beauty of nature and spiritual blessing in the diverse land. Like the many other parts of our country, Assam is in a unique position with regard to the choices it can offer to a tourist, simply because her green natural beauty, diverse culture and environment, some rare species of flora and fauna, wild animals and plants, religious faith, rich

heritage, tea gardens, river sites and above all the hospitality of the mixed ethnic people of Assam. History tells that since the days of Hieu-en Tsang, the great Chinese traveler, who came to Assam during the reign of Kumar Bhaskar Burman (594-650 AD), this region, has been fascinating millions of people. History of Assam goes back to ancient times, and references of this land can be found in Vedic, Puranic and Buddhist literature. The ungrudging blessings of nature have made tourism in Assam essentially nature-centric, despite the fact there are a good number of historical and religious places of tourist attraction. Assam is proud of many ancient temples and shrines like Kamakhya, Umananda, Basistha temple which are date back to pre-historic time. These are taken as the revered religious places in home and abroad. But here, there are many other religious places which are still not getting deserved recognition and fails to attract a large number of tourists. So this paper is a modest attempt to draw the eye and attention of the people towards such few places of Gohpur and Biswanath sub-division.

Gohpur and Biswanath sub-division are a large area and conjunctive part of Sonitpur district. Both the sub-divisions is bordered by hills of Arunachal Pradesh in north and mighty Brahmaputra in the south, Lakhimpur district in east and Tezpur in west. This area is a peaceful habitat with an assimilation of various ethnic tribes and groups like the Assamese, Bodo, Missing, Nepalese, Tea-tribes, Karbee, Muslim, Bengali, Minority, Marowary, Bihari Sikh etc., each having a distinct language, culture, religion, way-of-life, festivals, songs and dances. Both the places are connected by National Highway-52 and Railway. Gohpur has a glorious past with the freedom struggle of India where two youth martyr Kanaklata and Mukunda Kakaty sacrificed their life participating in the Quit India movement in 1942. The entire people of this land are very much sensitive and alert to all the aspects of socio-political, cultural, religious and controversial issues of the state as well as of the country in the passage of time. Here, in these very places there are a number of religious places where in lies the better prospect of pilgrim's tourism. Among these Biswanath Ghat, Gangmou Than, Kalyanee Than, Basudev DouL, Kam-Dewal, Bor-Kalika Than are considered as important to be discuss.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Biswanath Ghat

Biswanath Ghat is a famous tourist place of Assam. This ghat is located at the bank of Brahamaputra river in the south direction and about 15km far from NH-52. This famous religious place is popularly known as Gupta Kashi. Originally a temple of Lord Shiva was there at the junction of Burigonga and Brahmaputra river but doubted to be submerged underground during the great earthquake of 1897. Now what are left is just the few stone posts, beams and other ruins. During the summer these remains under deep water and these can be seen in winter. Kasi is considered to be the most sacred religious place by Hindu. It is said that Kasi is the common place for 33crore Hindu gods and goddess. Realizing the gravity, sanctity and mystery this place also compared to Kashi and so, it was named as Gupta Kashi during the golden rule of the Gupta Dynasty. The beauty of Biswanath Ghat is enriched by a small island which is known as Umatumuni. This island is also one of the famous places of Assam. The present Biswanath temple had been built in a high land, few meters away from the original one. Here is two temple. Now-a-days people pray, offer and worship devotedly in this temple seeking the blessing from gods and goddess. Their deep faith of existence of gods and goddess in this place direct the attention of pilgrims as well as tourist to Biswanath Ghat. On the third day of Assamese Rongali Bihu festival a big mela is held here. Besides, the local people observe Rass Leela, Bhowna and Biswanath Festival in the winter searion in grand splendour.



Fig. 1: Present Biswanath DouL

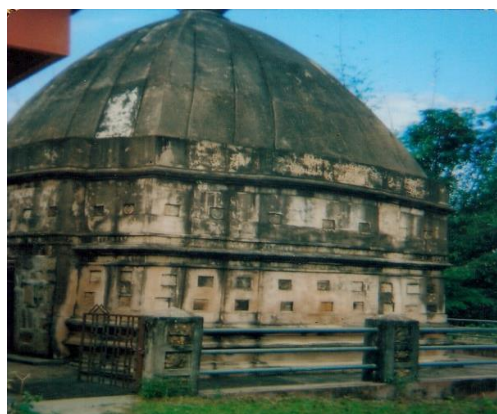


Fig. 2: Biswanath DouL

It is very good picnic place in winter season. Besides few hotels and Tourist lodge a govt. Circuit House is there for staying of the outsiders. A commercial centre with some small shops is seen enlarging in this place.



Fig. 3: Original Temple place



Fig. 4: Umatumuni island Identified area for Boating and Swimming

4.2 Gang-mou Than



Fig. 5: Gang-mou Than



Fig. 6: Entrance of Gang-mou Than

According to the tradition when Lord Krishna eloped with Rukminee and went ahead Dwaraka, she felt thirst of water and they stopped for a moment in this place and Lord Krishna extracted water for her by digging with his flute. In that spot a deep hole was seen by Rukminee. She asked Lord what this hole signifies. In response Lord said that in my next birth in Kaliyug I will step back to this place to wipe out the ignorance of sinful men. This place is presently known as Gangmou than. And many many years later mysteriously, this very place happened to be deeply related with Srimanta Sankardeva when He was propagating New-Baishnav Dharma in the North-East India. Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva came to this place about in 1438 A.D, (in the year 1516) in His 67 years under the pressure of insecurity feelings and frequent disturbance by the neighbouring Kosari Kingdom when He was in Bordua, which was a part of Bhuyan Rajya at that time. He established a Namghar at the assimilating point of Brahmaputra and Borgang river for dissemination of His religion, research and writing. The original name of this place was Ketai- Kha nagar which was under Dofola Rajya (NEFA- presently Arunachal Pradesh). After arrival of Sankardev, once the Dofola tax- collectors asked some fruits to eat. Sankardev gave them some Amla (*Emblica officinalis*). Then they asked water and Sankardev directed them to the nearby Gang (Ganga, river). After drinking, they felt the water too sweet and asked the name of the river. Sankardev answered it as Gang. But to immortalise the sweetness of water of that river they had tested, they suffixed Mou, (means-honey) in Gang. And since then this place is known as Gang-mou Than. Sankardev spent a memorable productive period of seven years and six months in this place with his family. It is considered as the second work place of Sankardev after Bordua. Here, Sankardev completed few of His Grand work like “Pasanda Mordon”, “Ojamila Upakhayan” and “Pahlad Sarit” which He started in Bordua. Besides, Sankardev composed His two most popular devotional songs, Bogeet initiating as “Pawe pori hori korohu katori” and Gopale ke goti koile” (in Assamese transcription).

In Assamese—“পাৰে পৰি হৰি, কৰোহো কাতৰি.....” আৰু
“গোপালে কি গতি কৈলে.....”

By the spiritual order of Lord Jagannath of Puri, a contemporary Brahmin Scholar named Jagadish Misra belonging to Trihut came to this place carrying Bhagwat Sastra for Sankardev. He read Bhagwat Sastra for Sankardev which took complete one year. Being satisfied with the successful completion of the wish of his Lord, which was asked him to do in his dream, Jagadish Misra desired to offer a piece of gold made flower for Lord Jagannath. Sankardev asked him to place the flower in and under two leaves of Borgos with sacred heart and devoted mind and to light a lamp in Lord's name. Jagadish Misra did accordingly and in that very night he dreamt that Lord Jagannath received that gold flower. And in the morning he went to that place of worship and surprised to see there not his offered flower but a small deep hole. Unfortunately he died in this place just after few days. Sankardev then started to translate the Bhagwat Sastra for the easy understanding of the common people. According to “Kayastha Somajor Etibitya” three sons of Sankardev, viz.- Ramananda, Kamalluson and Harisaran were born in Gang-mou Than. Laksmi Nath Bezbarua also supported this but according to Dr. Moheswar Neog, out of these three only Ramananda was born in Gang-mou Than. It is in this place the grand fathers of Sankardeva named Jayanta and Madhaba died.

Apart from the propagation of Neo-Baishnav Religion, Sankardev made many devoted disciple belonging to various ethnic tribes for maintaining peace, prosperity and communal harmony in this place. Out of those Paramananda Miri Deori Atoi from Missing tribe, Satananda or Debidas from Kayastha, one Nici disciple from present Arunachal Pradesh, Mona Vokot were his (Bor vokot) grand disciples. Sankardev left this Than in charge of Paramananda Atoi when he travelled with his family to Dhuahat (Belguri) of Majuli in about 1510 AD. Mona Vokot was a land lord and rich farmer at that time and the land of present biggest tea-garden in Asia Monabari Tea garden belonged to him. The original Gang-mou Than along with a part of big white lotus pond fell in to erosion of Brahmaputra river in about 1927-28. The present Than was established in 1981, two hundred meter away from the original one, in the very place which is believed to be Sankardeva's residence. It is made with the contribution and faith of the devotees. The mystery is that in the present Than too, there is a deep hole in a big underground rock connected with the river water which reminds people about the association of this place with Lord Krishna and Lord Jagannath. This hole is known as 'Kunda'. The diverse ethnic local people have deep faith in this place; they worship here, consider it as their spiritual guard and find blessing and solution of their problems by praying and devoting here. A small stone idol was recovered locally which very akin to Buddha idol worshipped here and people believes it as the idol of Sankardeva. The place is seen deprive of desired importance. It is situated in the Biswanath Sub-division, only 8 k.m. away from NH-52, in the south-west direction, a bordering place with the biggest Tea garden in Asia and eye pleasing river site extended to Kaziranga National Park. This Than can be upgraded to a center of Sankori Art and Culture. The white lotus pond bearing the ancient witness if thought for beautification and provide lodge, hotel, shop etc. this place have surely chance to attract the tourist to make it a center for pilgrims. It needs political will of our state.



Fig. 7: Mysterious Kunda (Hole) in Gang-mou Than



Fig. 8



Fig. 9: Gang-mou Than with Campus



Fig. 10: A part of the White Lotus Pond

4.3 Kalyanee Than



Fig. 11: Kalyanee Than



This Than or Deyalaya is situated in the south west corner from Gohpur at the distance of seventeen km., five km. distance from NH-52 towards south and two km. far from Brahmaputra river. According to the mythology and local beliefs its history goes back to the 10th century and king Kosan was associated with the establishment of this Than. Goddess Kalyani is worshipped here since its inception. Here, People pray and offer animals like goat and buffalo and birds like duck and pigeon and sacrifice these to please Devi Kalyani and to be blessed by Her. Specially, in the Durga Puja such sacrificial work is done in large amount. This Than is an important spiritual shelter for the local people. They believed that if Maa Kalyanee can be satisfied they could easily fulfill all their hopes and aspirations. Mysteriously, people's faith appears true. There are so many facts and miracle of Devi Kalyani for Her devotees which were shared by the blessed people at the time of site visit. "Deodhani nritya" is very famous here. Durga Puja is observed here with much delight. Besides, in the month of Feb-March, a ritual called "Mahayagya" is observed here and then Priest and Monks visit this Than from far places.



Fig. 12: Place for Mahayagya Ritua

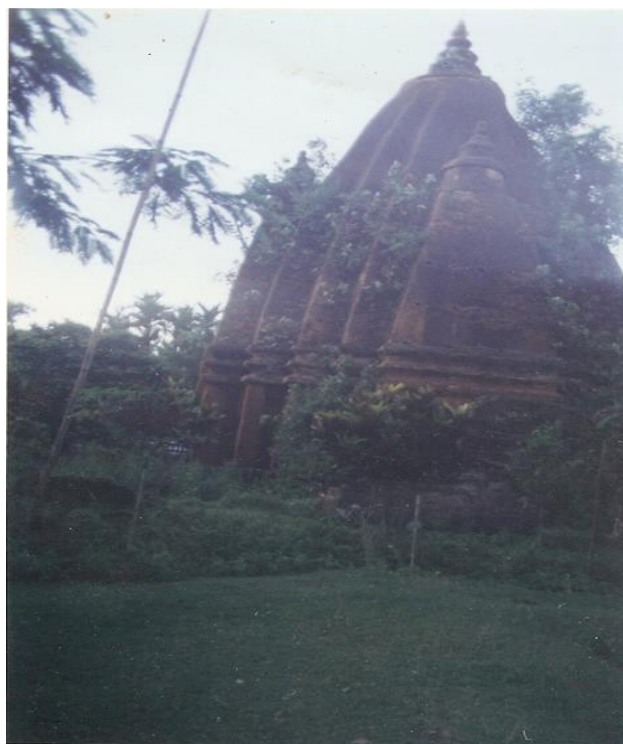


Fig. 13: Big Pond near the Than, A Good Place for Picnic



Fig. 14: Some Shops and Hotel around the Temple

4.4 Basudev Doul



This doul is in the place called Kalabari, five k.m away from the NH-52 towards south direction; two k.m distance from mighty Brahmaputra and seventeen k.m away from the Sub-divisional head quarter, Gohpur. It is a proud witness of religious temple of Ahom reign. This doul was constructed in 1758 A.D. by Numoli Borgohain with their traditional craftsmanship and architecture during the reign of Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha. Prior to this there was a *Satra*, a religious center of Ahom Kingdom. As its name implies here many incarnation of Lord Basudeva like- *Narayan, Brahma, Kubera, Kartik, Buddha, Yama, Parasuram, Kalki, Agni, Durga, Matsya* are worshipped since inception. It is 20 feet high and is horizontally divided into four sections known as *Mukhya mondopa, Main mondopa, Antarala and Garbhagriha*. Vertically the doul can be divided into three sections viz.- *padabhaga* (lower part), *triangabada* (middle part) and *sikhara* (roof part). *Garbhagriha* part is linked with a big pond near the doul. This pond is now used as fishery and the income i.e., surplus after consumption is distributed among the *Namghar* of the locality and in the name of maintenance of the doul. But the irony is that the doul is seen damaging day by day. Yet, the local people have faith in this doul and they worship and pray devotedly here for blessing of gods and goddess, continuing and considering it as a historical monument, as well as a cultural and religious heritage of Hindu. This doul too, may be a center of pilgrim tourism if necessary facilities, accommodations like lodge, hotel, toilet, urinal are provided and beautification is done to enlighten the heart and mind of the people. Near to this doul at a distance of about one km. there is another historical as well as religious place called Kam-Dewal, a good source of tourist attraction.

4.5 Bor-Kalika Than



This Than is located in the place called *Deorigaon, Howajan*; far east direction of Gohpur sub-division and twelve km away from the Sub-divisional head quarter, Gohpur and few meters away from NH-52. Originally, this Than was in a different place of Lakhimpur district which is known to be initiated in 12th -13th century. But later on it was transferred to the present place and reason of that yet not known. But since inception, *Devi Puja* is done here often with the sacrifice of animals and birds specially at the time of *Durga Puja*. The devotees have strong faith in this Than and so they visit, pray and offer here for blessing of the goddess.

5. CONCLUSION

It is seen that almost all the studied sites are situated either at the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra river or very closed to her; associated with religion, linked with history, mythology and also have glorious present with people's interest. Generally men are adventurous by nature and particularly Indians are very much emotional and conscious in terms of religion. So, it can be taken as a chance by preserving and developing these sites so as to attract the eye of more pilgrims in and abroad, which will certainly enrich the tourism sector of our state. For this, the needed facilities will have to be provided to the visitors to meet their satisfaction. In the district or sub-divisional level some tourist package can be provided. If a pilgrim's tour by river is planned, encompassing all these studied sites through the Brahmaputra by ship or boat; and the same can be extended to the green forest and rare wild life of Kazaringa, these will definitely attract the tourist even more than the Sunderbans of West Bengal. In the other states of our country there are so many examples of incoming money and of generating employment from the places, even of having less or no significance than these. Biswanath Ghat is a very good site for boating and swimming. We are lagging behind in this sector instead of having so many resources only because of the lack of - exposure, political will, vision, proper plan & policy, corrupting mentality, insurgency etc. To overcome all these problems good-will of our government and administration are most desirable. Tourism has generated employment in different parts of the country. Besides creating opportunities for tourist guides, conducted tours, establishment of hotels, and so many other avenues in the tertiary sector, tourism can be a major source of employment in Assam.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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