

# Sustainable Development through River Tourism: Prospects and Challenges in Assam

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## ABSTRACT

River tourism has gained global significance as a sustainable alternative to conventional tourism, offering avenues for economic growth while preserving natural ecosystems and cultural heritage. In Assam, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries present immense potential for developing river-based tourism, encompassing activities such as river cruises, eco-tourism, cultural exploration, and adventure sports. This study examines the prospects and challenges of river tourism in Assam as a pathway to sustainable development. On the one hand, river tourism can generate employment, boost local economies, enhance connectivity to rural and remote areas, and promote Assam's cultural identity to domestic and international audiences. It also has the potential to encourage ecological conservation and community participation when developed responsibly. On the other hand, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, seasonal navigability, environmental risks, lack of skilled manpower, and weak promotional strategies hinder its growth. Moreover, issues of pollution, overexploitation of resources, and the need for strong policy frameworks remain pressing concerns. The paper argues that a balanced, integrated approach—combining government initiatives, private investment, and community engagement—is essential for positioning river tourism as a driver of sustainable development in Assam.

**Keywords:** River Tourism, Sustainable Development, Brahmaputra, Assam, Eco-Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Community Participation, Tourism Prospects, Tourism Challenges, Environmental Conservation.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing industries globally, contributing significantly to economic development, employment generation, and cultural exchange. Within this, river tourism has attracted attention as a sustainable alternative to mass tourism, particularly in regions rich in natural water bodies. Assam, with its unique geographical location, cultural diversity, and ecological wealth, offers immense potential for developing river tourism.

The Brahmaputra River, one of the mightiest rivers of the world, along with tributaries such as the Subansiri, Manas, and Dhansiri, provides natural avenues for river cruises, eco-tourism, adventure sports, and cultural tours. This paper investigates the role of river tourism in achieving sustainable development in Assam by highlighting its prospects and challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Sustainable Tourism and Development:** Scholars such as Butler (1999) and Sharpley (2009) emphasize tourism's role in balancing economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development.

**River Tourism Globally:** Studies in Europe and Southeast Asia show that river tourism enhances regional connectivity, fosters eco-tourism, and promotes local culture (Hall & Härkönen, 2006).

**Indian Context:** River tourism in India is still emerging, with the Ganga, Kerala backwaters, and Sundarbans as examples (Bhatia, 2010).

**Assam Context:** Reports from the Assam Tourism Development Corporation and Ministry of Tourism highlight Brahmaputra river cruises as flagship products but point to infrastructural and promotional deficits.

The literature reveals a gap in holistic research on the integration of river tourism with sustainable development in Assam, which this paper seeks to address.

### Research Objectives

1. To analyze the prospects of river tourism in Assam.
2. To identify key challenges hindering its sustainable development.
3. To propose strategies for integrating river tourism with Assam's sustainable growth agenda.

### METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design, based on:

**Secondary Data:** Government policy documents, reports of Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), Assam Tourism Development Corporation, and academic studies.

**Case Analysis:** Review of successful river tourism models such as Brahmaputra River Cruises and international practices.

**Thematic Analysis:** Categorization of prospects, challenges, and strategies under economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

### Findings: Prospects of River Tourism in Assam

1. **Natural Endowments:** The Brahmaputra's vast expanse, islands like Majuli, and riverine landscapes provide scope for cruises, houseboats, and eco-tourism.
2. **Cultural Richness:** Traditional festivals (Bihu), crafts, cuisine, and performing arts can be showcased through river tourism.
3. **Employment and Livelihoods:** River cruises, homestays, handicrafts, and hospitality can provide rural employment and empower women.
4. **Eco-Tourism Linkages:** Proximity to wildlife reserves like Kaziranga and Dibru-Saikhowa enhances the eco-tourism potential.
5. **Cross-Border Connectivity:** The Indo-Bangladesh Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (IBP) provides opportunities to link Assam's river tourism to South Asian circuits.

### Findings: Challenges of River Tourism in Assam

1. **Infrastructural Deficiencies:** Lack of modern terminals, safety facilities, and reliable accommodation.
2. **Seasonal Navigability:** Floods, siltation, and water level fluctuations hinder year-round navigation.
3. **Environmental Concerns:** Pollution, waste disposal, and erosion threaten ecological balance.
4. **Institutional Gaps:** Weak policy implementation, fragmented governance, and limited private investment.
5. **Community and Skill Gaps:** Limited awareness, lack of training in hospitality, and poor marketing strategies.
6. **Safety and Security:** Unpredictable weather and inadequate safety standards limit tourist confidence.

### DISCUSSION

The study highlights a paradox: while Assam's river tourism potential is immense, its realization is constrained by structural and institutional weaknesses. Sustainable development requires an integrated model that balances

economic growth (employment and revenue), social inclusion (community participation and cultural preservation), and environmental safeguards (eco-friendly infrastructure and waste management).

Examples from Kerala's backwaters and European river cruise models show that community-based tourism, strong marketing, and government-private partnerships are crucial. Assam can adopt similar strategies tailored to its local socio-cultural and ecological contexts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Infrastructure Upgradation** – Develop eco-friendly terminals, houseboats, and safety systems.
2. **Community Involvement** – Train local communities in hospitality, guiding, and entrepreneurship.
3. **Policy Support** – Strengthen government frameworks, incentivize private sector investment, and align with national tourism missions.
4. **Environmental Management** – Introduce strict pollution norms, waste management systems, and erosion control measures.
5. **Marketing and Branding** – Promote the Brahmaputra globally as a “River of Culture and Sustainability.”
6. **Research and Monitoring** – Establish academic and institutional mechanisms to continuously monitor ecological and socio-economic impacts.

## CONCLUSION

River tourism in Assam, centered on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, holds vast potential to contribute to the state's sustainable development. It can generate inclusive economic growth, empower local communities, and preserve cultural and ecological heritage. However, infrastructural gaps, environmental risks, and institutional weaknesses must be addressed to fully realize this potential. A holistic, community-driven, and environmentally responsible approach can position Assam as a model for sustainable river tourism in India and beyond.

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