

HOMESTAY FOR WHOM? LESSONS OF ASEAN COUNTRIES FOR NORTH EAST INDIA

Ratna Bhuyan*, Santanu M. Deka**

Abstract

Community-based rural tourism in homestays is widely recognised as a sustainable model promoting livelihoods across the ASEAN countries. North East India comprising of the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim & Tripura sharing borders with the ASEAN countries has been trying to propagate rural homestay tourism. Given the success cases across the ASEAN countries in rural homestay tourism, the paper tries to bring to the fore the best practices, and catalytic factors and processes in community-based rural homestay tourism adopted by the ASEAN countries. Further, an attempt has been made to analyse the relevant best practices in rural homestay tourism across the ASEAN countries which can be replicated in North East India.

Keywords: Rural Homestay Tourism, Community Based Tourism, ASEAN, North East India, Cluster Homestay for Whom? Lessons of ASEAN Countries for North East India

INTRODUCTION

The changing environment also influences livelihoods which are adapted within the socio-economic and political contexts, processes and policies such as those determining the market. Today, when one talks of wedding tourism in India, the ever-changing context of livelihoods in one of the important livelihoods sector i.e. tourism, is well received. Among many an idea which pushed the development theories in the 1970s, tourism also evolved as a tool for poverty alleviation. However, it was not earlier than the 1990s that tourism became 'pro-poor tourism' practised mostly by the community-based organisations. And, with an increase in the trend of a tourist exploring new areas for visit and an increase in sense of environment and social responsibility, community-based tourism (CBT) today, is widely recognised as a more sustainable model for promoting rural tourism in areas having high potential for promotion of nature based and cultural tourism. CBT per se is managed and owned by the community, for the community. Homestays is one area which can be promoted through CBT.

The ASEAN countries with diverse culture, rich social structures and heritages along with the serene and pristine rural picturesque offer immense scope for rural tourism. Most rural tourism experience, be it ecotourism or community-

based tourism has an inbuilt space for rural homestays. Rural homestay is an accommodation in a private home giving the opportunity to know and experience the architecture of traditional culture by being a part of the host family for a short time (Cole, 2007; Lynch & MacWhannell, 2000). Here, the host may be a person or community. Therefore, rural homestays as the name suggests, is an exercise involving rural communities duly supported by local and regional government machinery with other non-state actors playing an equally important role. And, here the most crucial part is imparting systematic training to the villagers and honing their skills attuning to the holistic requirements of ensuring sustainable rural homestay models.

The ASEAN Countries' Experience in Rural Homestays

In Brunei Darussalam, the niche tourist option of enjoying traditional homestays has evolved to become a mainstream choice. The Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism in Brunei Darussalam is the coordinating point for the rural homestays having a quality check into their standard operating procedure in terms of packages and activities they offer. The rural homestays like the Baitul Wajjah located in a village called Kampong Wasan in the district of Brunei-

* Assistant Professor, National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), North Eastern Regional Centre, Guwahati, Assam, India. Email: ratnabhuyan.nird@gov.in

** Assistant Faculty Member, Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE), Guwahati, Assam, India. Email: santanudeka@rediffmail.com

Muara, a three bed-room homestay is in fact run by relatives, fellow villagers together with members of a cultural group. What the homestay has in place is a warm traditional welcome, homely comfort with cleanliness, traditional homemade cuisines, seasonal harvesting experience in paddy fields, and storytelling about the place, its people and culture during breakfast and dinner time.

Unlike Brunei Darussalam, the nearest neighbour of North East India, Myanmar is a country which runs on the beaten track of its shadowy history which has hardly allowed rural homestays to be a reality. Though the country boasts of tourist inflow, homestays in Myanmar are still not a reality, though permissions experienced allowing a couple of villages to host tourists sometimes are a welcome move. However, stringent regulations as such a part, the novel arrangement of each village taking a turn to cook, serve and entertain the tourist in a centrally located complex of a few thatched rooms made especially for the tourists moot the idea of having a clustered approach with a difference towards rural homestay tourism.

Myanmar's first community-based tourism project in four villages in Myaing is an example per se. A joint venture established with the able support of the country's Hotel and Tourism Ministry in securing community ownership of the homestay is a classic example of how community ownership across a cluster of villages can be built up in rural homestays by forming an overall coordination committee and by allocating a part of the income generated in a community corpus to be equally distributed among the villages. The Myaing homestay project has to its credit the recognition of receiving the first ASEAN community-based tourism standard certificate in Myanmar.

Community-based tourism projects, including homestays, are on the rise in Thailand. Tourism Authority of Thailand or TAT established in 1959, has been playing a crucial role in the development of tourism in the country. It was in the year 1999 that TAT started promoting homestay tourism along with agro-tourism. The homestay activities are planned and managed by local community members. Mostly led by trained community guides and host family members, community-based tourism is one of the most sought after livelihoods in Thailand. Most of these homestay programmes are designed to accommodate the elements of traditional lifestyle and culture (Kontogeorgopoulou et al., 2015). The most vital aspect is that the communities which desire to come up with community-based tourism models need to undergo training on homestays in all its aspects like planning, organising, managing, marketing, operation and monitoring. They are further assisted in conducting successful tours.

Civil war-ravaged Cambodia continues to recover, and in the past decade, the country's tourism economy has also taken off. In Cambodia, it is community-based tourism through which the sweet little homes in villages are tapping the

tourist inflow into the rural gamut by way of offering stays and rich experience of the natural beauty and traditions of Cambodia in these rural homes, as homestays are known in Cambodia. These rural homes are not only adding to the income of the families running them but are also serving as the sources of sustainable income generation.

In Vietnam, the rural families start a homestay on their accord. But typically, rural homestays in Vietnam are mostly a part of the community development initiative promoted by the non-government organisations and other civil society bodies. It is these non-state actors who help the village households with capital, training and marketing support. But the homestays need licenses for hosting foreign tourists. These hosts are often found to facilitate the needs of foreign tourists by way of installing western style washrooms.

Malaysian homestay tourism which started in the early 1970s in Cherating village, Pahang is community-based tourism. The homestay programme in Malaysia is still relatively new. Like in many other countries, the Malaysian experience in a homestay is a unique combination of experiencing the culture and lifestyle of local people. So far, the Malaysian government's commitment to homestay development is projected in its participation in comprehensive planning and construction of infrastructure, leading to the social capital building. The rural homestay programme in the country is carried out by a group of individuals who owns houses located in rural areas and also has a licence issued by the Ministry of Tourism and satisfies the criteria laid down by the Ministry such as having accessibility to the main road, separate bedroom and bathroom, no past criminal record, not suffering from communicable diseases and maintaining high standard of hygiene. Homeowners also need to attend basic training courses conducted by the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development. There is in place a homestay policy designed by the Ministry of Tourism in the country.

Malaysia has a Rural Tourism Master Plan (RTMP) to plan and guide rural tourism development in the country emphasising upon agro-tourism and rural homestay programmes. The RTMP tries ensuring that tourism activities in rural areas in Malaysia would connect both tourism products and cultural resources with possibilities for economic development (Marzuki et al., 2010; Liu, 2006). The Philippines has a robust National Tourism Development Plan which also focusses on homestay tourism through local communities. By way of promoting 20 cluster destinations and with more than 78 tourism development areas through local tourism councils and action groups, the Philippines government is encouraging rural homestays.

Rural homestays in Indonesia are small micro-enterprises run with the philosophy of community-based tourism and is a part of rural development efforts in the country with ecotourism

being at the centre (Nugroho et al., 2016). The existence of rural homestays in coastal Indonesia is in conformity with government regulations for managing coastal areas (Arevin, 2014). In fact, the promotion of rural tourism in Indonesia is a part of the framework of the Master Plan for tourism development in the country during 2010-25. The Ministry of Rural Tourism in the country has identified and established around 50 national tourism destinations among which 15 are promoted through destination management organisation (DMO) which is an integrated organisation representing the central and local government involving the local community, tourists and other stakeholders in planning, operating and monitoring sustainable tourism destinations.

This DMO is a concept following the ASEAN Tourism Marketing Strategy (ATMS) 2012-15 (ASEAN, 2012). The Lao People's Democratic Republic government focusses on development of sustainable tourism which is based on its rich culture and natural and historical resources. Much of the Lao PDR government's technical support is extended to community-based pro-poor tourism in rural areas. Within the village, earnings are generated through community-based tourism mostly from accommodation, eateries and boat trips to other islands, and rental of bicycles and motorbikes. These initiatives in tourism are mostly influenced by the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project, one of the earliest and largest best ecotourism projects in the country (Harrison, 2007).

Timor-Leste, which has a rich history of tourism during the sixties and seventies of the last century is currently opening its fold to adventure tourism, ethical tourism and eco-tourism emphasising the need for rural homestay tourism with local community involvement. As enshrined in its Constitution, natural resources and cultural heritage in Timor-Leste are preserved while promoting sustainable development. In the country, most guesthouses along the highlands or virgin coastal lines of Dili in Hatu Bilico, Ainaro and Bacau operate at the initiative of local private small-time entrepreneurs and their families. These guesthouses run in the mode of homestays as the entrepreneurs and their families organise dynamic activities like trekking, boat trips and horse riding accompanied by the host family and local neighbours.

While outing, most history and culture of Timor is told and discussed by the host accompanying the tourists. Besides, the country is also into community homestays wherein the community's involvement is entailed right from decision making to management of the homestay. In fact, Tua Koin eco-lodge on the island of Atauro has been a successful homestay experience in the country, demonstrating and training communities from nearby villages like Oecussi and Tutuala in homestay tourism. Clan based ownership of the villagers from a single village of a part of the tourism package in a homestay is yet another novel initiative in Timor-Leste.

Given the scenario in the ASEAN countries (UNWTO, 2017), the Act East policy if directed by the combined efforts of the different ministries which have a stake in the policy, would bring in feasible hope in broadcasting rural tourism and homestays in North East India by way of taking advantage from opening of the doors to the ASEAN countries. And, given the present situation in Myanmar, theoretically, business integration of the region through Act East policy sounds good. However, it may take more time for realising the true potentialities and possibilities of integration with the rest of the ASEAN economy. But in order to have a footing, it is equally important to look into where North East India stands vis-a-vis the ASEAN economy in terms of rural tourism and therefore, rural homestays.

Rural Homestay Experience in North East India

North-East India, which over the years has been tagged as a 'disturbed area' ridden by conflict of varied nature and forms like ethnic conflict, insurgency ridden secession movements, movements due to a sense of political alienation together with laggardness in the economic front and landlocked situation after independence of the country, in fact, have acted as peril for churning off an inclusive development process. And, the resultant is a region tagged with yet another (dis)qualification of being a 'backward region' with poor communication infrastructure, little options for diversified but rich livelihoods and decent technology intrusion. But the rural areas of North East India have both natural spaces and community culture to promote tourism (Barooah, 2018).

However, tourism in the region has had its own conditional consequences with conscious rural tourism paving its way into the region only recently. What is needed today is context-specific innovations in designing the rural tourism policy and an inclusive policy accommodating the socially and culturally marginalised communities. Further, to ensure the sustainability of any CBT related intervention in a village, it is imperative to develop a proper institutional mechanism looking into aspects like planning and management. No village at its own can operate in isolation.

When one talks of rural tourism and homestays in North East India, opportunities however, abound. Sikkim is the State in North East India which pioneered in creating an ecotourism pathway in the region weaving in principles of strong community participation and nature and culture conservation. It was in the year 2002 that a milestone was achieved in introducing the concepts of ecotourism and CBT in Sikkim and the other states of North East India. It is in the ecotourism sites of Kewzing, Yuksam, Dzongu and

Pastanga that the first CBT initiatives evolved with village homestays, a tourism product which ensured benefits from ecotourism and homestays percolating to local communities. Since then, Sikkim has taken several initiatives like the Sikkim Registration of Homestay Establishment Rules 2013 to support village tourism. However, quality homestay destinations are limited in number.

More recently, construction of 736 homestays by the Hospitality Division, Department of Tourism, Government of Sikkim under the rural tourism programme funded by the 13th Finance Commission across villages in Sikkim has given a big boost to the rural tourism in the State. In Assam, the Tourism Department has come up with a Rural Homestay Scheme called *Aamaar Aalohi* with the objective to give new dimensions and thrust to the rural homestay facilities in the State in places of tourist importance (Tourism Department, 2016). The scheme is being implemented through the Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC). In the village Dharikati in Sonitpur district of Assam, the women and youths of the Missing community have come up with a guesthouse facility and a weaving unit called Okum and Saneki respectively. Saneki produces many home décor items for the tourists.

States like Manipur and Nagaland are also not far behind with the government and stakeholders working towards the goal of promoting rural tourism. In Manipur, the homestay concept has been outlined in the State Tourism policy to promote it in a planned manner, especially in the interior areas. In Nagaland, it was way back that the green villages, Khonoma in Kohima district and Longwa in Mon district and the famous Hornbill Festival in the Kisama village established the potentials for rural tourism in the state. With Hornbill Festival and spring season being the most visited seasons for tourists along with Dzukou valley and Mt. Japfu being the recent additions to the list, Kipfuzha, an extension of the village Kigwema near Kohima and Cedar homestays are torchbearers of successful homestays in Nagaland. Most people running the homestays here are housewives or locals.

Although Nagaland does not have a concrete policy on tourism or for that matter on rural homestays, initiatives like SHAWL, a connotation used to denote Self Help to Advance Women's Lives, an initiative by Explore Nagaland has been offering a yeoman's service by way of running homestays by the household members during peak season. Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya also have come up with some streamlined efforts in promoting rural tourism. In Arunachal Pradesh, with 12 distinctive tourist circuits of Tezpur-Bhalukpong-Bomdila-Tawang, Itanagar-Ziro-Daporijo-Aalo-Pasighat, Pasighat-Jengging-Yingkiong-Tuting, Tinsukia-Tezu-Hayuliang, Margherita-Miao-Namdhapa-Vijoyagar, Roing-Mayudia-Anini, Tezpur-Seijosa-Bhalukpong, Ziro-

Palin-Nyapin-Sangram-Koloriang, Doimukh-Sagalee-Pake Kessang-Seppa, Aalo-Mechuka, Daporijo-Taliha-Siyum-Nacho and Jairampur-Manmao-Nampong-Pangsau Pass with variegated topography and vegetation and with different ethnic cultures, it is the Rural Tourism Management Committee (RTMC) which is imparting training and capacity building to the unemployed youth, panchayat bodies and self-help group members from across the circuits on community based rural tourism.

A recent homestay policy guidelines developed for the State of Arunachal Pradesh by WWF-India with the support of GoI-UNDP in 2012 had suggested the constitution of Village Tourism Management Committee (VTMC) of local villagers affiliated to State Tourism Department for managing all CBT related activities including homestays in the village (Dutta, 2012). Similarly, in Meghalaya, the Department of Tourism is promoting CBT in rural areas under the umbrella of Meghalaya Village Development and Tourism Promotion Cooperative Society Ltd. Infact, Mawlynnong in Meghalaya, Asia's cleanest village along with Smit, Sohra, Jowai and Mawphlang have some organised homestays being run successfully by the village communities (Tourism Policies of Eight States of North East India, various years).

Prospects for Rural Homestay Tourism in North East India

Homestays, especially in rural areas, have possibilities in North East India. But when one looks into the fact whether the region is trying to have an all-inclusive cohesive capacity building initiative for propagating rural homestay tourism, it is again not happening. One here needs to go into a little statistics. With tourist inflow annually into the region, one also needs to look into the category of tourists making a visit. Again, one has to segregate and find out the number of local, regional and tourists from outside the region visiting North East India vis-à-vis the tourists from outside the country. With foreign tourist inflow on a rise in this part of the country at a compound growth rate of 9.73 from 37380 in 2005 to 84820 in 2013 (Ministry of Tourism, GoI 2014) and with states like Sikkim, Assam and Meghalaya attracting a good number of rural tourists annually, rural homestay tourism needs a reverent approach to its development. In fact, the decadal figures of foreign tourists visiting North East India which stood at 3.13 million in 1993-2003 went up to 6.68 million during the decade 2003- 2013 (Ministry of Tourism, GoI 2014).

Rural homestays may not be a viable financial proposition but when offered as a complete package encompassing all cultural aspects, sight-seeing, ethnic cuisine and visiting rural crafts, arts and weaves, the way it has been packaged by countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam,

and Brunei Darussalam, it becomes an industry with huge potential to create rural micro-enterprises generating income and employment opportunities. North East India needs to learn from the experiences of these countries in homestay tourism and replicate the successful models and aspects. In other words, the ASEAN countries have kept CBT in the forefront for promotion of rural tourism and therefore, rural homestays.

Sensitisation and awareness building among the communities to tap the opportunities in this virgin sector is the key to the right beginning. For instance, North East India being a biodiversity hotspot in the world attracts a wide spectrum of tourists to its pristine forests, hills, wildlife and bird sanctuaries, and national parks. The forest fringe villages mostly inhabited by tribal communities, can facilitate the tourist to have community-based homestay experience along with giving exposure to its authentic traditional culture and lifestyle.

Similarly, the crafts and weaves of North East India are unequivocally unique, and the traditional craft clusters like Sualkuchi – the hub of weaving, Majuli – the centre of mask making, Sarthebari – the brass and bell metal precinct and Dubarpara – the Sitalpati zone, Dibrugarh – the tea district in Assam, Ziro – the weaving centre, Poma – the cane and bamboo arts and crafts nucleus and Tawang – the carpet making centre in Arunachal Pradesh, Khonoma – the hub for cultural tourism in Nagaland, Thoubal – the centre point of *kouna* cluster and Loktak lake – the place for black pottery in Manipur, Majlispur – the centre for bamboo mat making in Tripura, Okhrey – the nucleus for carpet making in Sikkim, Sohliya – the strawberry garden, Umden – the *Eri* hub and Tura – the cashew nut hub in Meghalaya can also be converted into community-based clusters of homestays for promoting cultural tourism. This would not only be a unique proposition for the tourists but also bring to life the most needed market support to the different lingering crafts and weaves in the Handloom and Handicraft sectors in the region. The learnings from the best practices of the ASEAN countries provide impetus for adopting a need-based approach for promoting rural homestays for acceptability and sustainability.

The elements that are contributing towards the success of the rural homestay models in the ASEAN countries are both community and support eco-system oriented. The community-oriented catalytic factors include appreciation and adoption of the rural homestay model by the community, efforts of the community towards enhancing their capabilities to tap the opportunities and achievement of joint action in order to achieve economies of scale and standardisation of services. Similarly, the role of the support system including the government through

favourable infrastructure creation, capacity building and policy support has aided in bringing about necessary synergy in rural homestay tourism complementing the efforts of the communities across the ASEAN countries. Whereas in North East India, with discrete and sporadic efforts both from community as well as government, the region is finding it hard to replicate similar success stories in rural homestay tourism. Therefore, the way ahead lies in a well thought out community-oriented model with the right set of facilitation from the policy quarters.

Following the ASEAN countries, North East India needs to build upon community-based rural tourism comprising of rural homestays. There is no denying the fact that the demonstration effect can have multiplier implications on community involvement and participation. There is therefore, an immediate need for pilot initiatives in rural homestays in selected locations on a cluster basis. Based on the key learnings from the successful cases in the ASEAN countries, such pilot clusters of community-based rural homestays can look into the successful elements like the capacity building of the community as well as community guides as is case in Thailand.

The strategy may involve:

- Development of cluster-based coordination model as in Brunei Darussalam with quality checks as part of the standard operating procedure (SOP) to attract tourists as the tourist knows what he/she can expect from the homestay packages. Following such SOPs inbuilt in homestay promotion, will ensure homely comfort with cleanliness;
- In case of the forest fringe villages in Kaziranga, Manash, Namdapha in North East India, the model followed in Myanmar to have an overall coordination committee among villages to develop and manage the homestays and effective usufruct-sharing mechanism can be adopted;
- As in the case of Indonesia experience, a combination of micro-enterprise model driven by support from community involvement should also be explored, especially in investment sensitive aspects like coming up with modern homestays with a traditional touch;
- As in Vietnam and Thailand, it is the tour operators who incorporate rural tourism as an integral part of their tour packages and involve rural communities in cultural tourism as well as rural homestays;
- Malaysia's experience shows how policy can support social capital building and comprehensive planning with standardisation of the homestays which again is inbuilt in the licensing policy for rural homestays. Attempts in North East India in this direction are already in place but more needs to be done before the region can replicate the Malaysian model in entirety;

- The Philippines experience of local tourism councils and action groups to plan for more micro-segments at cluster level can help North East India in drawing a focussed and need specific micro plan for rural homestays;
- The Timor-Leste experience of diversifying rural homestay tourism into other minor segments like adventure tourism, ethnic tourism, eco-tourism, health tourism and culture tourism can be followed by the rural homestays in North East India too.

The eventual success of the entire segment lies in the marketing of the rural homestays. In this aspect, the ASEAN countries have a coordinated approach involving communities, tour operators, government and other non-state actors. Any policy on a rural homestay in North East India needs to incorporate this vital aspect for bringing in vibrant rural homestay tourism in the region. Adherence to the millennium sustainable development goals (SDG) in publicity and promotion of rural community homestays in North East India can add value to the community based rural homestay models developed hereon.

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