

Tourism, Culture, and Ecology: Socio-Cultural and Environmental Impacts of Brahmaputra River Tourism in Guwahati, Chandrapur, And North Guwahati, Assam, India

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Abstract

This study critically explores the cultural implications of expanding river tourism along the Brahmaputra River in Assam, focusing on the communities of Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati. While river-based tourism enhances economic opportunities and increases visibility for regional heritage, it simultaneously poses risks such as the commodification of sacred traditions, ritual simplification, and the erosion of cultural authenticity. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork and ethnographic insights, the research identifies key areas where cultural dilution is occurring. In response, it proposes a context-sensitive Community-Based Tourism (CBT) framework aimed at empowering local stakeholders and promoting sustainable cultural preservation. The paper underscores the dual nature of river tourism—as both a catalyst for cultural revitalization and a threat to intangible heritage and advocates for inclusive, community-led strategies to protect Assam’s rich socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords: River Tourism, Brahmaputra, Assam, Cultural Commodification, Ritual Simplification, Community-Based Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION

River tourism has emerged as a significant avenue for economic development and cultural exchange in many regions across the globe. In Assam, the Brahmaputra River one of the major trans-boundary rivers in South Asia has become a focal point for promoting tourism that blends natural beauty with deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions. From temple visits and ritual festivals to river cruises and heritage walks, tourism along the Brahmaputra offers diverse experiences that attract both domestic and international tourists.

However, the rapid expansion of tourism in this region has sparked concerns regarding its socio-cultural implications. The transformation of sacred rituals into performative spectacles for tourists, the simplification of complex spiritual practices, and the growing commercialization of local heritage threaten the authenticity and integrity of Assam’s intangible cultural traditions. Communities located along the riverbanks particularly in Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati are witnessing a gradual shift in cultural expression, religious observance, and social dynamics due to the influx of tourism.

This study seeks to critically examine how river tourism has influenced the cultural fabric of these communities, focusing on both the opportunities it presents and the threats it poses. By investigating issues such as cultural commodification, ritual transformation, and the changing roles of local stakeholders, the research aims to provide a balanced analysis of tourism-induced change. Moreover, it explores how a Community-Based Tourism (CBT) model can be adopted to safeguard intangible heritage, ensure local participation, and promote sustainable cultural preservation.

Through qualitative fieldwork, stakeholder interviews, and case studies, this paper contributes to broader debates on tourism and cultural sustainability in riverine regions. In doing so, it highlights the urgent need for inclusive, locally-driven strategies that recognize the value of cultural authenticity and empower communities as custodians of their heritage.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The socio-cultural consequences of tourism have long been a subject of scholarly attention, especially in contexts where heritage and spirituality intersect with economic development. Foundational studies by Mathieson and Wall (1982) highlight the dual nature of tourism: while it stimulates local economies, it can also disrupt existing social and cultural systems. Cohen (1988) further develops this discourse through the concept of cultural commodification, where traditions are reinterpreted or simplified to align with tourist expectations, thereby threatening their original meanings and authenticity.

In relation to host-guest relationships, Wang and Pfister (2008) argue that tourism not only affects material culture but also reconfigures social identities and relationships within communities. Their work underscores the need to assess cultural carrying capacity, especially in regions with fragile intangible heritage. These foundational theories form the basis for examining how tourism can alter ritualistic and symbolic practices, particularly in spiritually significant spaces.

Within the Indian context, several studies have addressed the transformation of sacred geographies under tourism pressures. Singh (2004) explores Varanasi as a contested space where spiritual traditions are increasingly aligned with touristic consumption, often sidelining the needs and voices of local residents. Similarly, Bandyopadhyay and Morais (2005) examine Pushkar as a site where sacredness and commercialism intersect, leading to the reframing of rituals as public performances for external audiences. These studies underscore how pilgrimage centers across India are evolving into hybrid cultural-tourist destinations.

Focusing specifically on Assam and the Brahmaputra River, more recent scholarship has begun to examine the emerging tourism trends. Gogoi (2017) investigates the rise of river cruises and temple-based tourism along the Brahmaputra, identifying both economic potential and emerging cultural tensions. Baruah (2020) explores how religious events like the Ambubachi Mela have transformed into large-scale tourist spectacles, contributing to infrastructural development while simultaneously altering the ritual character of these events.

Despite these contributions, current literature remains largely focused on the economic and logistical aspects of tourism, with limited exploration of its deep socio-cultural impacts. Few studies critically analyze how tourism reshapes ritual practices, festival formats, traditional art forms, and community identities in Assam's riverine regions. Moreover, the potential of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) to mitigate such challenges and empower local actors remains insufficiently explored in the Assamese context.

This study seeks to address these gaps by critically examining the interlinkages between tourism, cultural commodification, and community agency along the Brahmaputra. It focuses particularly on Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati sites where tourism, spirituality, and riverine identity converge and explores the potential of CBT as a sustainable, locally rooted strategy for cultural preservation.

Literature Gap

While existing studies on river tourism in Assam, such as those by Gogoi (2017) and Baruah (2020), highlight its economic and infrastructural aspects, they offer limited insight into the socio-cultural impacts on local communities. The commodification of rituals, erosion of authenticity, and community perceptions of tourism remain underexplored. Additionally, the potential of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) as a strategy for preserving intangible heritage in Assam's riverine regions has not been adequately addressed. This study fills these gaps by focusing on cultural transformation and local agency in Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach combining ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data analysis. Fieldwork was conducted between 2021 and 2024 in Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati. A total of 150 interviews were held with priests, artisans, elders, tourism operators, and female cultural organizers.

Participant observation during key festivals like Ambubachi Mela, Chhath Puja, and Doul Utsav provided firsthand insights into ritual practices and tourist-local dynamics. Secondary sources such as academic texts and tourism reports supported contextual analysis. Data were thematically coded to identify patterns in cultural commodification, authenticity, and community empowerment.

Study Area

- Guwahati serves as the principal urban and religious center of Assam, known for its vibrant mix of pilgrimage, cultural tourism, and recreational river activities. Iconic religious landmarks such as Kamakhya Temple, Umananda Island, and the Fancy Bazaar Ghat draw thousands of visitors annually, particularly during major festivals like Ambubachi Mela. Guwahati also functions as a commercial hub for river cruises and waterfront development, making it a key node for understanding urban river tourism.
- Chandrapur, located on the eastern periphery of Guwahati, presents a semi-rural landscape undergoing rapid transformation. Traditionally characterized by its agricultural lands, wetlands, and sacred riverbanks, it is now emerging as a popular picnic and tourism destination. Chandrapur is also facing heightened environmental pressures, including erosion, pollution, and challenges related to the proposed relocation of Guwahati's waste dumping site.
- North Guwahati, positioned directly across the river from the city, houses important Vaishnavite temples such as Douli Govinda and Ashwakanta, as well as heritage ghats with long-standing ritual importance. The area plays a central role in festival-based tourism, particularly during Ashokashtami and Doulutsav, and illustrates the ongoing tension between cultural preservation and the commercial expansion of tourism infrastructure.

Data Collection Methods

To ensure a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis, the following qualitative methods were employed:

- **Field Observations:** Systematic observations were conducted during peak tourism and religious seasons, including Ambubachi Mela, Chhath Puja, and Doulutsav. Attention was paid to ritual performance, visitor behavior, environmental conditions, and the use of public infrastructure along the riverbanks.
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including temple priests, ghat committee members, local women, youth volunteers, tourism vendors, and boat operators. These conversations provided rich insights into cultural practices, gender dynamics, governance challenges, and perceptions of tourism-induced change.
- **Document and Policy Analysis:** A review was undertaken of tourism policies issued by the Government of Assam, municipal development plans, heritage conservation documents, NGO reports, and media coverage. These secondary sources provided a broader policy context and supported triangulation of field data.
- **Visual and Spatial Documentation:** Photography and site mapping were used to document spatial transformations, erosion patterns, infrastructural deficits, and crowding during festivals. This helped contextualize narrative data within observable environmental and physical realities.

By integrating these diverse sources of data across three key sites, the study captures the layered realities of river tourism in Assam. This multi-sited, triangulated approach enables a holistic understanding of how tourism interacts with cultural heritage, gendered social roles, and ecological vulnerabilities in the Brahmaputra riverine corridor.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the major findings of the study, derived from field observations, interviews, and secondary document analysis across Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati. The results reveal how river tourism along the Brahmaputra impacts cultural heritage, gender dynamics, environmental health, and the socio-political fabric of local communities.

4.1 Cultural Erosion and Commodification

The transformation of rituals and sacred spaces into consumable tourist attractions has emerged as a defining feature of river tourism in Assam. Increasingly, cultural expressions are being staged or repackaged to cater to tourist expectations, often at the expense of their deeper symbolic meanings and community relevance.

Rituals such as Bihu and Doulutsav, traditionally embedded in seasonal cycles and community participation, are now choreographed as fast-paced performances intended for tourist entertainment. This shift aligns with what MacCannell (1973) termed "staged authenticity," where cultural expressions are stylized and detached from their original context. What were once spontaneous celebrations have

become spectacles, often shortened and dramatized, reducing their spiritual intensity and participatory depth.

Institutions such as the Mahabahu Brahmaputra Heritage Centre, while intended to preserve Assamese culture, tend to prioritize aesthetic displays such as curated art installations and multimedia exhibits over lived, participatory traditions. As a result, cultural preservation becomes a visual experience for outsiders, rather than a living, evolving process sustained by local communities.

Furthermore, sacred riverfront sites like Kuruwa Ghat and Umananda Island are increasingly being rented out for destination weddings, film shoots, and commercial events. These developments, while economically beneficial for certain stakeholders, often alienate local residents who see these sites as spaces of prayer, mourning, and generational memory. Residents report a growing sense of dispossession and exclusion, as religious rituals are rescheduled or relocated to accommodate tourist-oriented events.

Collectively, these trends contribute to the commodification of culture, whereby rituals, spaces, and symbols are reinterpreted for consumption, stripping them of their community-centered meaning. The long-term consequence is not only the dilution of cultural authenticity but also a loss of intergenerational transmission of intangible heritage.

4.2 Displacement and Community Strain

Tourism development has intensified land-use conflicts, with infrastructural expansion encroaching upon agricultural lands and traditional commons. In Chandrapur, farmland has been converted into picnic zones and event venues without proper community consultation. In North Guwahati, local fishermen report displacement due to the construction of boat terminals and new docking facilities, undermining their livelihoods. Furthermore, community-based governance structures such as temple management bodies and ghat committees have been increasingly marginalized by private tourism operators, weakening local authority and threatening the stewardship of cultural resources.

4.3 Gender Inequality in Tourism Participation

Despite playing a significant role in the spiritual and cultural fabric of the region, women remain largely invisible in formal tourism governance. Their participation is limited to informal roles as vendors, cleaners, or occasional performers while decision-making positions are dominated by men or external tourism stakeholders. Symbolic rituals like the Ambubachi Mela, which centers on female fertility and divinity, are often sensationalized for tourists, trivializing the ritual's deeper meanings. The lack of safe, gender-sensitive infrastructure, including toilets, breastfeeding rooms, and adequate lighting, disproportionately excludes women particularly elderly women and solo travelers from fully engaging in tourism-related activities.

4.4 Lifestyle Disruptions and Overcrowding

The influx of tourists during major festivals has significantly altered local lifestyles, creating overcrowding, noise pollution, and an increase in antisocial behaviors such as public intoxication, harassment, and reckless boating. Residents of Guwahati report that seasonal tourism creates gridlocked traffic, inflated prices, and excessive waste generation. Community elders express concern that youth behavior is being influenced by outside tourist culture, leading to intergenerational tensions and a perceived erosion of moral and cultural values. Local rituals are increasingly being rescheduled or shortened to accommodate tourist itineraries, leading to a dilution of their original rhythm and community significance.

4.5 Environmental Ramifications

The environmental degradation linked to river tourism is particularly acute. The expansion of floating restaurants, unregulated cruise operations, and plastic-heavy rituals has led to visible pollution in the Brahmaputra River. Oil leaks, sewage discharge, and flower-and-cloth-based offerings accumulate in sacred water zones, compromising their ritual sanctity. In Ashwaklanta and Umananda, unchecked tourism has accelerated riverbank erosion and endangered flora and fauna. Wetlands such as Khamrenga Beel, once rich in aquatic biodiversity and culturally protected as community spaces, are now under threat from sand mining, land encroachment, and careless tourist behavior. These changes not only harm ecosystems but also weaken spiritual connections between communities and the river.

5. Policy Recommendations: Toward Inclusive and Sustainable River Tourism in Assam

Based on the analysis of socio-cultural and environmental impacts observed in Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati, this section proposes a set of policy recommendations aimed at fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and ecologically responsible model of river tourism along the Brahmaputra River. These recommendations seek to balance economic opportunities with cultural preservation, community empowerment, and environmental sustainability.

A) Promoting Gender Inclusion and Social Equity

i. Support Women's Economic Empowerment: River tourism must move beyond male-dominated structures by actively incorporating women as economic stakeholders. Targeted skill development programs in boat operation, heritage interpretation, artisanal crafts, and eco-hospitality should be offered to women, particularly in Chandrapur and North Guwahati. Microcredit schemes and cooperative business models can support women's entrepreneurship, helping them transition from marginal vending roles to formal employment and leadership positions within the tourism value chain.

ii. Ensure Safe and Gender-Sensitive Infrastructure: Women and vulnerable populations are often deterred from participating in tourism spaces due to infrastructural gaps. Safe, gender-inclusive facilities including accessible public toilets, breastfeeding rooms, shaded seating, and emergency kiosks should be prioritized at high-traffic riverfront sites like Umananda and Ashwaklanta. Strengthened patrolling, improved lighting, and visible grievance redressal mechanisms are also critical for ensuring security and dignity for all users.

iii. Encourage Women's Leadership in Tourism Governance: Local women, especially those traditionally involved in rituals, should be included in temple boards, ghat committees, and tourism advisory councils. Their perspectives are essential for gender-sensitive policy planning and for ensuring that tourism infrastructure and event management align with cultural protocols and communal needs.

B) Strengthening Government Regulation and Cultural Safeguards

i. Designate Protected Cultural and Ecological Zones: The government should formally designate key areas such as Khamrenga Beel, Tapoban, Ashwaklanta, and Umananda Island as protected eco-cultural zones. Such recognition should limit the construction of disruptive infrastructure like cruise terminals, picnic parks, and access roads through development caps, buffer zones, and zoning laws that prioritize ritual sanctity, biodiversity conservation, and local access.

ii. Enforce Mandatory Cultural Codes of Conduct: All private tourism operators especially cruise companies, event planners, and waterfront developers—must be required to follow a standardized Cultural Respect Charter. This should regulate behaviors such as noise during rituals, intrusive photography, and staff conduct. Training modules on local etiquette and religious significance should be developed in consultation with temple authorities and community elders.

iii. Pollution Control and Waste Management Mandates: Stringent environmental licensing protocols should be imposed on all tourism-linked businesses, with special focus on cruise operations, floating restaurants, and ferry services. This includes requirements for waste segregation, sewage treatment, and oil spill prevention. Sites like Fancy Bazaar Ghat and Digaru River, which are currently overburdened by tourism-induced pollution, must be prioritized for real-time monitoring and enforcement.

iv. Institutionalize Public-Private-Community Partnerships (PPCP): To prevent top-down, extractive models of tourism, all large-scale river tourism projects should be governed through inclusive Public-Private-Community Partnerships. Community representation must be mandatory in approval boards, and transparent benefit-sharing models (e.g., equity stakes, revenue-sharing) should be developed. This will empower local populations and ensure that tourism benefits are equitably redistributed.

C) Environmental Restoration and Ecological Resilience

In order to mitigate the environmental degradation caused by unregulated tourism, it is imperative to integrate ecological restoration into tourism planning. Strengthening the resilience of river ecosystems will ensure long-term sustainability while aligning with the spiritual and cultural ethos of riverbank communities.

i. Riverbank Stabilization Projects: Targeted restoration efforts should be initiated in erosion-prone sites such as Umananda Island, Kachari Ghat, Ashwaklanta, and Chandrapur. Techniques such as bioengineering, native vegetation planting, and community-managed green buffers can prevent soil erosion, stabilize riverbanks, and enhance aquatic habitats. These efforts should actively involve local

youths, eco-clubs, and temple volunteers, foster environmental stewardship and create livelihood opportunities through conservation-linked tourism.

ii. Wetland and Beel Conservation: Wetlands such as Khamrenga Beel and associated floodplains serve both ecological and cultural functions, including fishing, ritual immersion, and seasonal festivals. Their degradation due to commercial encroachment and waste disposal must be addressed through strict zoning regulations and visitor flow control. The development of low-impact eco-tourism infrastructure including wooden boardwalks, birdwatching towers, and cultural interpretation panels can promote education and awareness while minimizing human interference.

iii. Eco-Certification for Tourism Operators: A standardized eco-certification program should be launched to assess and rate tour operators based on key sustainability indicators such as waste management practices, cultural sensitivity, carbon footprint, and renewable energy use. Certified operators should receive preferential access to tourism zones, promotional incentives from tourism boards, and eligibility for green subsidies. This not only raises environmental standards but also fosters responsible competition among operators.

D) Research, Monitoring, and Adaptive Management

Ongoing, place-based research and data-driven decision-making are essential for the adaptive governance of river tourism. These recommendations aim to bridge policy with practice through academic collaboration, community knowledge, and technological innovation.

i. Mandate Cultural and Environmental Impact Assessments (CIA & EIA): Before approving any new tourism infrastructure—such as cruise terminals, performance stages, or ghats—a comprehensive Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) must be conducted. These assessments should be carried out in collaboration with local universities, heritage experts, temple custodians, and community representatives, ensuring that intangible heritage and ecological thresholds are respected.

ii. Deploy Technology for Monitoring and Feedback: The use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), visitor tracking technologies, and real-time feedback applications can assist in monitoring tourist congestion, waste levels, ritual disruption, and ecological stress. Dashboards that integrate local data with tourism flows can guide authorities in issuing alerts, rerouting visitor traffic, or adjusting festival management strategies seasonally.

iii. Institutionalize Academic-Community Partnerships: Long-term sustainability requires collaboration between academic institutions, civil society, and religious custodians. Local colleges and NGOs can assist in data collection, ritual documentation, and ecological surveys, while simultaneously designing public education materials, school curricula, and exhibitions that promote a deeper appreciation for river cultures. These partnerships also help develop local capacity in sustainable tourism governance.

E) Cultural Revitalization through Participatory Tourism

Beyond regulation and conservation, river tourism in Assam must also serve as a platform for cultural revitalization and intergenerational transmission. A participatory model can reconnect communities—especially the youth—with their traditions, while offering tourists authentic and respectful experiences rooted in local knowledge systems.

i. Reclaim Ritual Spaces for Local Use: Sacred riverfronts such as Rajaduar Ghat and Kuruwa Ghat in North Guwahati should be designated as community-first ritual zones, with clearly demarcated hours during which local worshippers can access the ghats without external disruption. Such temporal zoning would restore sanctity, reduce tourist interference, and preserve the spiritual rhythm of daily life.

ii. Encourage Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Models: Policies should promote decentralized, community-managed tourism initiatives such as homestays, folk craft workshops, village-based heritage walks, and ritual education programs. These CBT models allow local residents to determine the scale, pace, and tone of tourism while ensuring that profits remain within the community. Women's cooperatives and youth self-help groups can play a central role in designing and leading such programs.

iii. Promote Youth Involvement in Heritage Transmission: Youths should be actively engaged through partnerships with local schools, colleges, and cultural organizations to learn and document traditions such as Nam-Kirtan singing, boat-making, temple mural painting, and oral storytelling. By organizing community competitions, internship programs with temple trusts, and eco-cultural clubs, policymakers can ensure continuity and pride in cultural heritage among the next generation.

CONCLUSION

For the Brahmaputra River to thrive as both a sacred entity and a responsible tourism destination, its management must be community-centered, ecologically balanced, and culturally grounded. The findings from Guwahati, Chandrapur, and North Guwahati point to the urgent need for inclusive planning that protects intangible traditions, strengthens local governance, and curbs environmental decline.

The policy recommendations outlined in this paper—encompassing gender inclusion, ecological restoration, technological monitoring, and participatory cultural models—provide a roadmap toward ethical, resilient, and place-sensitive tourism. Crucially, the emphasis must shift from commodification to co-creation, from exploitation to empowerment, and from transience to continuity.

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