

# Promotion of Special Interest Tourism (SIT) as a Strategic Option for Responsible Tourism Development in the North Eastern States of India

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## Abstract

The North-eastern states of India, with their unique cultural diversity, beautiful landscapes, and rich history, have immense potential for responsible tourism development. A well-known strategic approach to promoting responsible and sustainable tourism in the region is special interest tourism, or SIT. SIT provides a targeted and sustainable approach with extensive features that help preserve the unique biodiversity and culture of the area while also strengthening local communities. This paper examines the idea of responsible development for the states of North-East India. It demonstrates how it could promote the socioeconomic well-being of locals while protecting the area's natural and cultural heritage. A SWOT(C) analysis of SIT investigates internal and external factors that may impact the strategy's success. With proper management and the development of SITs, the region has great potential to be a unique and sustainable tourism destination, to the benefit of both locals and tourists interested in experiencing the exceptional beauty and special tourism it can offer.

**Keywords:** North-Eastern States of India, Special Interest Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, SWOT(C) Analysis, Strategic Tourism Approach, Responsible Travel

## Introduction

A specialized area of the travel and tourism sector known as Special Interest Tourism (SIT) caters to people or groups with narrowly focused passions, interests, or hobbies. SIT is intended to offer distinctive and customized experiences that align with the personal interests and preferences of the tourists, as opposed to mass tourism, which frequently concentrates on well-known locations and generic travel experiences. Special Interest Tourism (SIT) is described as tourism undertaken for a distinct and specialized purpose, suggesting that the tourist has a particular reason based on their interest to visit a different location (Brotherton & Himmetoğlu, 1997). SIT encourages tourists to engage in behaviors that, at best, reinforce their sense of self and, at worst, may be “justified” as socially responsible. This helps distinguish “SIT” from mass tourism (Morgan & Pritchard, 1999). This kind of tourism caters to a broad spectrum of specialized interests, including adventure, wildlife, eco-tourism, gastronomy, and cultural and historical hobbies (Wriker & Firth, 2021). Customization is the main feature of special interest tourism. It is the offering of customized leisure and recreational activities motivated by the particular interests that

individuals and groups have expressed (Derrett, 2001). It gives visitors the chance to discover and partake in activities that are closely associated with their interests or passions. SIT strives to engage people in immersive experiences, regardless of their specific interests. SIT has been attracting more attention in recent years as tourists look for more authentic and significant experiences. It frequently involves smaller, more personal group sizes and enables tourists to meet others who have similar interests. Because it promotes ethical and ecological travel, this kind of tourism can also benefit the environment and nearby communities. From a local to a global level, the overall system is indicative of political, economic, ecological, technological, and socio-cultural concerns (Trauer, 2006).

### **North Eastern States of India**

The North Eastern States of India, also known as the “Seven Sisters,” make up a special and distinctive region. In addition to the “Seven Sisters,” Sikkim is known to be the brother of the North-Eastern States of India. India’s North Eastern Region (NER), which includes the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is the nation’s most eastern region. China to the north, Myanmar to the east, Bangladesh to the southwest, Nepal to the west, and Bhutan to the northwest all have international borders with the region. The NER spans 262,184 square kilometers in total. (Roy et al., 2015; Choudhury et al., 2021).

The North-Eastern states are acknowledged for their various indigenous groups, lively customs, and rich cultural tapestry. An interesting area for cultural and anthropological study, the region has a diverse population with many different ethnic groups and languages (Baruah, 1999). Additionally, it is the region for numerous festivals that showcase the diverse and colorful traditions of its communities. The North-Eastern states have historically been characterized by complicated questions of identity, insurgency, and autonomy movements in addition to their cultural assets (Bhaumik, 1996). Due to these influences, several regional parties and tribal councils have emerged, reshaping the political landscape of the area.

In light of its strategic location, the North-Eastern states have become a key focal point in India’s foreign policy, particularly as the country seeks to deepen its engagements with the Indo-Pacific region (Malik, 2014). Understanding the North Eastern States of India is pivotal not only for academic interests but also for comprehending the broader dynamics of the nation’s multi-ethnic and multi-cultural tapestry, its political landscape, economic prospects, and its position on the global stage.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The origin of Special Interest Tourism could be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a solution to mass tourism, which often resulted in uniform experiences and adverse socio-environmental effects (Jin & Sparks, 2017). Brotherton & Himmetolu (1997) defined special interest tourism (SIT) as travel that has a clear, defined purpose and implies that the motivation for travelers to travel to a different location is a particular interest. This contrasts with general interest tourism (GIT), in which the primary driving force behind tourism is the destination’s attributes, which together contribute to a significant portion of the tourism product. Ma et al. (2020) claim that special interest tourism (SIT) has always been viewed as the opposite of mass tourism, with Special Interest travelers expecting more specialized experiences based on their interests. There have been claims, meanwhile, that SIT and general tourism, or mass tourism, frequently overlap and are not inherently mutually exclusive. SIT involves various forms of tourism such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism, and culinary tourism, among others (Sebayang & Subakti, 2023). Such diversification indicates a shift of consumers' focus from the traditional travel oriented towards travel as an experience. Through this experience, tourists are instead involved

emotionally rather than passively consuming products (Sousa, 2018). The rise in the demand for authentic experiences has resulted in the development of SIT as a viable alternative to former tourism paradigms (Sibi, 2017).

There could be many reasons as to why one would participate in SIT. Research has shown that special interest tourists frequently will want to pursue very specific themes or activities as per their preferences (Wen & Wu, 2020). Mckercher & Chan (2005) argued that the term “Special Interest Tourist” should be substituted with a more accurate but less glamorous term, “tourists who visit attractions or activities that are evocative of a specialist interest.” This more accurately sets the pursuit of the specialized interest at the center of the decision of travel and destination choice. The significance of the role of cultures in creating the portrayal of a destination is essential in the context of attracting Special Interest Tourists and therefore it has been recommended that destination marketing organizations take advantage of such cultural phenomena (Lee & Bai., 2016). Cultural tourism is an important element in the general SIT which focuses on the preservation and enhancement of local traditions and cultures. According to Chen (2024), incorporating local cultural practices and knowledge in a tourist’s itinerary not only enriches the experience, instills a sense of pride in the community, and helps preserve its culture. The concept of Sustainable Development requires environmental conservation while being able to provide economic benefits to the surrounding communities. The encouragement of ecotourism and cultural tourism in allowing the implementation of SIT will not only promote environmental conservation but will also help in safeguarding the cultural heritage which is advantageous to the environment and local people (Baro et al., 2022).

Additionally, SIT has the potential to act as a catalyst for economic growth in the less developed regions. According to Grant (2000), there are social exclusion problems and limited economic activities in most rural areas. Trauer (2006) examines the various aspects of special interest tourism (SIT) in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the author, SIT provides people the opportunity to partake in activities that strengthen their sense of self and could be viewed as socially responsible. The author also contends that SIT satisfies tourists’ desire for happiness and personal fulfillment while providing a qualitative difference from mass tourism. According to Kruja (2011), the majority of Special Interest Tourists are middle-aged or older, as well as teens and younger travelers (from family or educational groups) who have an adventurous, curious, and sharing mindset. The author claims that several areas, including natural resources, organic food, cultural and religious legacy, and mountain scenery, might help small regions develop a special interest in tourism.

The importance of technology to enhance SIT cannot be overstated. The emergence of digital platforms and social networks has revolutionized the experience of how tourists experience and participate in niche tourism. For instance, Yoon et al., (2020) stated that online marketing strategies can greatly increase the market presence of SIT offerings, enabling the small operators to reach a global audience. Such democratization of information assists travelers in making appropriate decisions regarding their tourism activities hence, encouraging an eco-friendlier sustainable form of travel that promotes veneration of the communities visited. Sousa (2018) claims that innovation is crucial for SIT. There are many new challenges and substantial changes facing the tourism industry, such as the rise of new tourism forms and the effects of information and communication technologies on the development, production, and consumption of tourism-related products. The author also emphasizes how consumer behavior has changed in the tourism industry, focusing more on sophisticated, specialized, and segmented consumers looking for a unique experience. The author argues that innovation plays an important role in the travel

and tourism sectors, especially in SIT, where innovative elements can stimulate entrepreneurial activities. In general, innovation is believed to be a major factor in the SIT industry's growth and competitiveness. According to Wen & Wu (2020), catering to tourists with special interests can present several issues for destinations. These include the need to ensure safety and ethical considerations, to provide specialized services and experiences that cater to the particular requirements and interests of these visitors, and to strike a balance between the pursuit of profit and the protection of the environment and community at large. Additionally, while accommodating tourists with special interests from various locations, destinations may need to take cultural norms and differences into account.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on secondary data sources to highlight the potential and challenges of promoting Special Interest Tourism (SIT) in the North-eastern states of India. The research methodology involves a comprehensive literature review, reports, and statistical data concerning various trends in tourism, as well as socio-cultural aspects of the area.

Relevance and credibility were the primary guiding principles in selecting data sources. Government and industry reports were selected for their authoritative insights into policies and strategic directions. Peer-reviewed academic journals and books that focused on SIT and tourism in the North-eastern states of the country were also chosen. Such diverse sources ensure the provision of a well-rounded background as well as making fair observations concerning the issue. The data for this research was collected from various secondary sources, including government reports, annual reports, and tourism development strategies that were put out by both the Ministry of Tourism Government of India and the State Tourism Departments for North-Eastern states. Furthermore, academic journals which discuss SIT (Special Interest Tourism), and regional tourism patterns among others were studied along with books and paper presentations made across various platforms. For instance, industry document publications produced by travel associations such as the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) were also used to give insights and complement data obtained from other credible sources such as the United Nations World Trade Organisation (UNWTO).

## **SPECIAL INTEREST TOURISM IN THE NORTH EASTERN STATES**

The North-Eastern States of India, with their unique cultural diversity, immaculate landscapes, and rich legacy, provide great promises for responsible tourism development. A well-known strategic option for promoting ethical and ecological tourism in the region is special interest tourism (SIT). Concerning the states of North-Eastern India, this section examines the idea of SIT and demonstrates how it could enhance the socioeconomic status of the local community while protecting the region's natural and cultural heritage.

### **SIT and responsible tourism**

Special Interest Tourism comes in a variety of niche tourism categories, including ecotourism, cultural tourism, wildlife tourism, and heritage tourism, in line with the principles of responsible tourism. SIT places a strong emphasis on civic engagement, environmental protection, and the observance of cultural traditions in the north-eastern states. The North-Eastern States of India are renowned for their untouched landscapes, incredible biodiversity, and cultural diversity. A customized strategy to highlight the region's distinctive offerings is provided by Special Interest Tourism, which encompasses a variety of specialty categories like cultural tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism, and wildlife tourism. Numerous studies

emphasize how SIT has the potential to promote economic empowerment, cultural interchange, and environmental preservation. SIT has the potential to maintain a harmonic balance between tourism development and the preservation of the environment and culture by catering to the many interests of visitors while encouraging responsible practices.

### **Empowering local communities**

SIT's potential to strengthen local communities is one of its key advantages. An example is a homestay, which allows local families to directly engage in the tourism sector. In addition to generating revenue, accommodating guests in one's house promotes cultural interchange and builds respect and understanding between each other. SIT transforms into a potent tool for inclusive and sustainable development by assisting regional activities. Through programs like homestays, SIT promotes community involvement. With this strategy, local communities can benefit economically, exchange cultures, and feel a sense of pride and ownership.

### **Infrastructure Development and Connectivity**

Investments in infrastructure and better connectivity must go hand in hand with the development and promotion of SIT in the North-Eastern states of India. To attract a wider range of tourists, it is crucial to develop transportation facilities, accommodations, and other critical infrastructure. According to various research studies, these investments are essential to ensuring that tourists can access and take advantage of the distinctive experiences provided by SIT. In addition to being crucial for travelers' comfort, the improved connection also makes isolated and pristine destinations more accessible, reducing the environmental effect of tourism. Infrastructure improvements and better connectivity are crucial if SIT is to reach its full potential. To draw in a wider variety of visitors, it is essential to upgrade the infrastructure of highways, airports, and accommodation facilities.

## **SWOT(C) ANALYSIS**

With an emphasis on ethical and sustainable tourism practices, a SWOT(C) analysis of Special Interest Tourism as a strategic option for responsible tourism development in the North-Eastern States of India identifies internal and external elements that may impact the strategy's success.

### **Strengths**

India's North-Eastern states are well known for its extraordinary cultural diversity. There are many different indigenous tribes and ethnic groups, and they all have their customs, works of art, music, and festivals. This diversity of cultures can work to the advantage of special interest tourism. The North East is a desirable location for tourists who are seeking to experience other cultures personally. It is a full and immersive experience where they can interact with the local community, partake in traditional festivals, and engage in authentic cultural activities. The North East is also a popular destination for eco-tourists and wildlife enthusiasts due to its astounding diversity of flora and fauna. Several endangered species find refuge in the area's verdant forests, unspoiled rivers, and untouched natural ecosystems. By providing environmentally friendly and wildlife-focused activities that support sustainability and conservation initiatives, such as birdwatching, jungle safaris, and trekking, responsible tourism can take advantage of this richness. The North-Eastern States could benefit from financial benefits from special interest tourism. Local communities may generate revenue through homestays, guided tours, the sale of handmade crafts, and cultural events by creating specialty tourism products. This can help with the region's poverty alleviation and offer much-needed livelihood opportunities—two important components of responsible tourism.



Sustainable practices are naturally encouraged by the emphasis on responsible tourism. This involves reducing the detrimental effects of tourism on the environment and culture. In the North East, responsible tourism can emphasize preserving cultural heritage, conserving fragile ecosystems, and promoting energy- and waste-efficient practices. This strategy guarantees the preservation of the area's distinctive offerings for upcoming generations while also being in line with global sustainability goals. When compared to the other parts of the country, the uniqueness and exclusivity of the North East are still intact since it has not been overtaken by mass tourism. The desire for exploration and innovation is a great asset. The North East will appeal to tourists looking for unique, off-the-beaten-path experiences, and they are frequently more receptive to local traditions and environments. Tourists with particular interests are drawn to destinations through special interest tourism. Experiences can be tailored in the North East for these specialized markets. Increased engagement and satisfaction from tourists as a result of this focused strategy may encourage future visits and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Additionally, the North-Eastern states are renowned for their hospitality and safety in many places. For tourists, hospitable and accommodating locals can make a big difference in their overall experience. Responsible tourism must prioritize safety, and the region's reputation for safety can work to its advantage.

Special interest tourism presents a strategic option for responsible tourism growth in the North Eastern States of India, owing to their unique strengths. This region is an excellent destination for tourists looking for unique and immersive travel experiences because of its vast cultural diversity, biodiversity, economic opportunities, emphasis on sustainability, authenticity, appeal to niche markets, safety, and warm hospitality.

### **Weaknesses**

There are serious infrastructure limitations in the North-Eastern States of India, such as insufficient accommodation, transportation, and medical services. The expansion of special interest tourism may be impeded by these limitations. For example, it may be difficult for tourists to visit remote destinations due to poor road conditions and limited air connectivity. The time and effort needed to travel within the region are increased, in addition to the inconvenience caused by a lack of transportation facilities. It may be challenging to find high-quality accommodation, particularly in remote or underdeveloped destinations. Insufficient accommodation choices may discourage tourists seeking comfortable and environmentally conscious travel since sustainable accommodation is often addressed in responsible tourism. Tourists may experience hardship if there are no sufficient options for accommodation readily available. The healthcare system in certain regions might not be equipped to deal with medical crises or problems that tourists might come across. One of the most important components of responsible tourism is guaranteeing the health and safety of tourists. Particularly in rural areas, the absence of suitable medical services might be a serious risk. Also, both tourists and local communities might not fully comprehend the concepts of responsible tourism. The effective implementation of sustainable tourism practices may be limited by a lack of understanding regarding these practices. Without education and awareness initiatives, this can result in unsustainable behaviors like littering and overuse of natural resources.

There are certain limitations in the North-Eastern states where entry requires a specific permit. Some states require an Inner Line Permit (ILP) to enter, while other regions require a Protected Area Permit (PAP) to access a specific area. For tourists, this might mean taking an additional step, which would be inconvenient. Also, permits from government authorities may be needed for several kinds of special interest tourism activities, including wildlife observation, trekking in protected regions, and adventure sports. Because of the long processing timeframes, opaque procedures, and lack of transparency, these

permits can sometimes be challenging to obtain. For tourists and tour operators in particular, obtaining permissions can be very challenging, which causes major inconvenience. Also, the language barrier could pose challenges for tourists as well as locals in some remote areas. Encouraging cultural exchanges, guaranteeing safety, and offering high-quality services all depend on effective communication. Language barriers can make it difficult for tourists to communicate effectively, which makes it challenging for visitors to communicate with the local community and also comply with regulatory requirements. Due to extreme weather conditions, there may be limited tourist seasons in several places in the North-Eastern states. For instance, prolonged monsoon rains may limit the length of the tourism season by compromising accessibility and safety. Seasonal constraints may have an impact on local communities' employment prospects and the sustainability of tourism-related businesses.

When it comes to national and international tourism promotion, the North-Eastern states are frequently overlooked. Potential tourists may not be aware of the area due to ineffective marketing and promotion, which would reduce the region's tourism potential. A multifaceted strategy, including community involvement, private sector initiatives, and government intervention, is required to address these weaknesses. To overcome these obstacles and build a thriving and sustainable responsible tourism industry in the North Eastern States of India, infrastructure development, education and training in responsible tourism practices, and improvements in healthcare and accommodation services are crucial.

### **Opportunities**

The government can create specific legal frameworks that support the growth of responsible tourism, facilitating the adoption of sustainable practices by businesses and communities. The development of infrastructure, community training, and efficient marketing in the region can be facilitated by financial support and resources made available by government initiatives and incentives to encourage responsible tourism. Partnering with NGOs and international organizations can help initiatives promote responsible tourism by providing resources, financing, and technical support. These collaborators can support the use of best practices in conservation, community involvement, and sustainability. Since the North-East States share borders with other countries, neighboring countries like Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar provide opportunities for cross-border tourism, generating new markets and opportunities for business. Many ethnic groups and indigenous tribes reside in the North-Eastern states. By providing homestays, cultural immersion, and opportunities to engage with the locals, responsible tourism can strengthen these communities. This gives tourists authentic experiences while also bringing in revenue for these communities.

The responsible tourism paradigm can be improved by including local communities in benefit-sharing and decision-making procedures. Initiatives for community-driven tourism can guarantee that the local population directly benefits economically from tourism. Supporting cross-cultural interactions between tourists and the community may assist in the promotion and preservation of indigenous practices. Opportunities for local talents, entertainers, and cultural educators could develop as a result. Cultural diversity, unspoiled natural landscapes, and rich biodiversity are just a few of the North-Eastern States' Unique Selling Points (USP) that can be effectively marketed. Marketing strategies that are tailored to emphasize these unique features can attract responsible tourists. Digital marketing and social media platforms may assist in reaching a wider audience and generating buzz about the region's special interest offerings.

The natural landscapes of the region create opportunities for agro-tourism. Both traditional agriculture methods and organic farming practices are available to tourists. In contrast to other well-known

destinations for tourists in India, a large number of destinations in the North-Eastern states are still largely unexplored. Tourists looking for remote, untouched places will find these pristine landscapes to be a treasure trove, which will encourage the growth of sustainable tourism infrastructure in these areas. There are states within the North-Eastern region famous for tea plantations and farming, which could attract even more tourists should there be more promotion and attention paid to the same. North-Eastern food is very delightful and diverse, featuring items like momo, thukpa, and recipes made with bamboo shoots. Tourists can experience these distinctive flavors and cooking techniques through culinary tourism. Owing to its rugged landscape, the region is ideal for adventure sports, including paragliding in Sikkim, river rafting in Arunachal Pradesh, and trekking in the Eastern Himalayas. Adventure tourism has a huge potential to attract adventure seekers, resulting in a boost to the local economy. Policymakers and the government ought to encourage adventure tourism in the North-Eastern states since it has the potential to boost not just the local economy but also the tourism sector as a whole. The region has the potential to become a global example of responsible and sustainable tourism. The North-Eastern states might attract responsible tourists seeking sustainable and ethical travel options by emphasizing eco-friendly measures, encouraging community-based tourism, and conserving its pristine nature.

The North-Eastern States of India possess significant opportunities for capitalizing on the potential of special interest tourism (SIT) while simultaneously advocating for responsible and sustainable tourism. Stakeholders can create a tourism industry that benefits tourists and local communities while protecting the nature and heritage of the region by embracing its cultural diversity, scenic beauty, and distinctive services.

### **Threats (Challenges)**

While it is important to focus on and promote the marginalized region of the North-Eastern States, improper and unsystematic planning could have adverse consequences. The authentic nature of regional cultures and environments can be compromised by a spike in tourists and an excessive focus on commercialization. If not properly controlled, excessive tourism development can result in the commodification of tourists and a loss of the distinctive identity that initially draws tourists with special interests. Tourism actions, such as pollution, deforestation, and littering, may harm the region's natural beauty and threaten its fragile ecosystems. It is possible that initiatives to promote tourism both domestically and abroad do not give the North-Eastern States as much attention. This lack of promotion may cause potential tourists to be less conscious of responsible tourism, which could impede its development.

A tourist's experience may be adversely impacted by limited transportation alternatives and bad road conditions. Responsible tourists may be discouraged by inadequate lodging options and health hazards associated with substandard healthcare facilities. Additionally, the severe weather conditions in the North-Eastern states may limit the region's tourist seasons. Extreme cold, intense monsoon rainfall and other weather-related issues might shorten the length of the tourist season, which has an impact on the sustainability of the tourism industry. Natural calamities, including earthquakes, landslides, floods, and cyclones, are common in this region. Events of this nature have the potential to negatively impact tourism, damage infrastructure, and compromise tourists' safety. Strategies for risk management and disaster preparedness should be part of any responsible tourism planning.

Also, there have previously been conflicts and warfare in some areas of the North-Eastern states. These issues could pose security risks, compromising tourists' safety. Potential tourists may be discouraged by safety concerns, especially if they are interested in responsible tourism. Additionally, there may be



differences in income between the local community members who benefit from tourism and those who do not. Inadequate management of the uneven distribution of tourism-related revenue can cause social unrest and adverse effects on the local community. Ensuring the equitable distribution of tourism's economic benefits is crucial.

To counter these concerns, the North-Eastern states should prioritize responsible tourism practices, including community involvement, sustainable development, cultural preservation, and disaster preparedness. For these threats to be reduced and responsible tourism to be encouraged in the area, cooperation between the public and commercial sectors is essential.

## CONCLUSION

The cooperation of numerous stakeholders is crucial for the success of SIT in the north-eastern states of India. To enable the successful implementation of SIT activities, government agencies, local communities, and the tourism sector must collaborate. To create and sell SIT experiences, conserve the area's pristine landscapes, and uphold their distinctive cultural heritage, a unified effort must be a priority. In conclusion, the north-eastern states of India provide an excellent opportunity for responsible tourism growth due to their natural beauty, rich culture, and diverse traditions. With its wide range of segments, special interest tourism offers a sustainable and targeted strategy that may strengthen local communities and protect the area's distinctive nature and culture. While there are obstacles and barriers to overcome, such as the requirement for responsible behavior and infrastructure development, these can be done with cooperation and a dedication to responsible tourism guiding principles. The North-East Mountains realize their full potential as a distinctive and sustainable tourism destination with careful management and the development of SIT, to the advantage of both locals and tourists looking to experience their pristine beauty. The North-Eastern States are ready to welcome responsible tourists and offer life-changing experiences that contribute to the well-being of local communities while conserving the region's distinctive identity and environment because of its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and rich heritage.

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