

Raas Festival: A Catalyst for Tourism Development in Assam, India

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Cover Page Footnote

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1. Introduction

Uniqueness defines the cultural identity of a society. The facets of culture are manifested through various medium. Performing arts is one of the aesthetically presented forms of culture that enhances the glory of a society. Songs, dance, drama, etc. have evolved as recreational escape from day-to-day tedious lives of the people. In the absence of technology, these kinds of gatherings entertained people and provided reasons for living. Age old cultures function involving all the people of the community. Participation in cultural activities, preparation of food and food sharing happened to be the ways of marry-making from timetotime. As time passed by, these activities assumed the form of seasonal festivals which were religion-oriented, since religion greatly influenced shaping the culture and unique ethnic identity of any traditional society. These small recreational affairs evolve to newer and greater dimensions with time, expanding participation from beyond the community.

The grandeur and scale of celebration attracts larger participation not only from within the community, but also from outside, largely for business prospects. The pomp and splendor also attract visitors to participate in the festivities and experience the culture and cuisine of the community. The festival throws open a vista of income and employment generation opportunities that cater to tourist demand in the destination. Over the years, there has been a growing awareness of tourism as a human activity, an industry and a catalyst for economic growth and development. Like any other industries, the tourism industry draws resources from the economy, adds value and produces marketable products. The tourism industry impacts various ancillary industries as well.

Tourism industry is an invisible umbrella industry comprising a set of inter-related business participants like transport and communication services, accommodation facilities, travel companies, recreation and entertainment providers, business catering to tourists' demands. Tourist spending in a destination affects business activity by altering the production and income. These changes generate indirect effect by creating demand in backward-linked businesses for supply of goods and services in tourism business. Again, income earned from tourism activities by households induce expenditure in an array of goods and services. The direct and the secondary effects (indirect and induced) result in a multiple increase in income in the destination. The multiplier effect which measures the impact of additional expenditure incurred by tourists in an economy was introduced by Hughes (1994) and Frechtling and Horvath (1999). It captures the secondary effects of tourism spending and indicates the various sectors in a community that benefit from tourism (Stynes, 1997).

Of the various type of tourism, cultural/festival tourism is booming as it generally focuses on unique customs and art form of the indigenous communities.

Further, cultural tourism can help protect indigenous people and their environments by providing a sustainable alternative to subsistence. The added income and exposure can satisfy goals of development while contributing to cultural pride and autonomy of the host community. Of course, cultural tourism can also have many negative consequences including commoditization of culture and loss of cultural identity. In any case, tourism brings changes as the stakeholders gain or lose ownership, access, and adapt to a new economic system.

2. Literature Review

Festivals exhibit the rich cultural practices and uphold the ethnic identity and history of the community. They exert strong socio-economic impact and have the potential to revitalize regional economies and propel growth and development. Hence, festivals are emerging as a tourism product that has attracted attention of policy makers across the world (Nath et. al 2017).

Various studies have highlighted that festival tourism has the potential of extending tourism season, enhancing community cohesion and increasing economic gains (Felsenstein and Fleischer 2003, Okech 2011, Gonzales 2017, Doe et. al 2021). As tourists visit the festivals to experience the culture, tradition, and history of the community, demand for amenities and activities that cater to tourist needs arise in the destination. The spillover effect enhances employment opportunities and generates sustainable income, thereby positively impacting livelihood. Increased tourist expenditure induces local people to engage in tourism and augment their income (Nurse 2002, O' Sullivan and Jackson 2002, Congcong 2014, Ahebwa et.al 2016, Sinha and Murdia 2018, Bayani 2020, Bejrgan et. al 2020, Dani 2020). Economic impact analysis traces the flow of tourist expenditure and provide tangible estimates of the changes in sales, income, tax revenue, and jobs due to tourism activity in an area (Stynes, 1997). The Keynesian Multiplier has been used in economic impact studies by researchers to gauge the multiplier effect of tourism activity on the local economy (Dube 1995, Trebicka 2016, Kessy et. al 2018, Nugraha and Flora 2021).

It has also been observed that festivals are increasingly being used as a tool to attract tourists throughout the world. In a bid to promote tourism, tourism developers have resorted to commodification of culture and religion based on market demand and consumer behavior, ignoring the basic need for celebration. Many festivals that were traditionally organized by local communities as part of their religion and custom, have now transitioned into mega tourism carnivals that provide profitable business opportunities. Social marketers are using them as implements to achieve social and cultural objects (Huang 2004, Ghosal 2006, Lundup 2018, Swapna and Thyagaraju 2020, Dychkovsky and Sergulvano 2020).

Studies have also highlighted the challenges these festivals pose on local administration. Increased tourist inflow not only exerts pressure on infrastructure and degrades the environment, but also negatively impact culture and tradition of the local community. Hence, a holistic approach should be adopted for sustainable development of festival tourism. Authors have called for greater government interventions through destination management strategies that would focus on the rich cultural heritage and provide visitors with unique experience (Idrees 1988, Angeloni 2013, Shee 2020).

3. Area of Study: Raas Festival of Nalbari, Assam

The source of Raas is related to the neo-Vaishnavite movement spearheaded by Srimanta Sankardev. This movement grew popularity against the then existing Saivism (patronized by Ahom Kings from 7th to 12th centuries in Kamrupa) and Saktism (around 8th century onward) in Assam. The Koch king Naranarayana patronised Vaishnavism and thus the Bhakti movement gained momentum in the line of teachings of Srimanta Sankardev during 15th-16th century. By the next century, Vaishnavism had developed a strong foothold as a popular faith in the land. Raas festival was first celebrated by the Vaishnavites in Majuli, the river island of Assam. In recent years, this festival has emerged as one of the most celebrated annual events in Nalbari, Majuli, Lakhimpur, Barpeta among other places in the state. While the worship of idols during the Raas festival is not a common practice in all the *satras*, idol worship has been observed since 1840 AD by different sects (Adhikari 2020). The festival celebrates the life of Lord Krishna through the cultural performances and sculpture displays. The artistes perform *bhawna* (plays), songs and dances, all of which depict the life of Lord Krishna, to pay their obeisance towards the *Avatar*. Traditional musical instruments, viz., *khol* (percussion instrument), *bhortaal* (big brass cymbals), *doba* (temple drums) *nagara* (folk drums) are used in performances.

In the study area, Nalbari, the Raas festival was celebrated in an old open field during 1933-1945. Henceforth, the festival was shifted to the Nalbari Hari Mandir premises. It deserves a mention in its context that Shri Amar Kundu (hailing from Barak valley), the then overseer in the department of Gorkaptani (PWD) at Nalbari and Sri Naren Bose, a medical assistant to the Nalbari veterinary hospital, took keen interest to initiate the Raas festival. Till day, this festival is organized in Nalbari in a grand manner.

The festival has grown in scale and grandeur over the years drawing large number of devotees and culture enthusiasts, leading to a burgeoning of economic activities in the destination. However, there is a dearth of literature on the impact of the festival on the local community. To address this research gap, the paper

attempts to assess the various socio-economic impact of the Raas festival on the local economy and grasp the perception of tourists on the festival.

4. Methodology

To assess the socio-economic impact of festival tourism, structured questionnaires have been used to collect primary data. Data have been collected during the thirteen-day festival as well as post-festival over a period of three months, from November 2022 to January 2023. Slovin Formula has been used to determine the sample size (with 5% margin of error) for the local community. Following the random sampling technique, a sample of 327 local respondents of the Nalbari town has been considered in the study. While purposive sampling method has been used to select people who have businesses in and around the festival site, a sample of 92 tourists has been randomly selected from the site. In-depth interview with Hari Mandir committee officials in the festival site, observations, and secondary data elicited from published government documents and journals have also been used to obtain comprehensive results. Data has been analyzed using the statistical software SPSS 20.

Keynesian income multiplier has been used to gauge the economic impact of tourists spending in the local economy. The formula used in the study is:

Keynesian Income Multiplier = (Direct sales + Indirect sales + Induced sales)/
Direct sales

- (i) If the value of the multiplier is less than or equal to zero, then there is no economic impact of tourism in the destination
- (ii) If the value of the multiplier lies between zero and one, then there is low economic impact of tourism in the destination
- (iii) If the value of the multiplier is greater than one, then there is high economic impact of tourism in the destination

Capture rate = local final demand/ tourism spending in local area

Economic Impact of tourist spending = multiplier × average expenditure per tourist × number of tourists

Probit analysis, a variant of regression analysis, was introduced by Chester Bliss in 1934. It is a statistical methodology for modeling dichotomous outcome variables. In the generalized linear framework, the probit model uses a probit link function. A probit model is estimated using the maximum likelihood procedure. To assess the influence of socio-economic variables on participation or non-participation of local community in festival tourism, a probit regression model has been used in the study.

Model Specification

The model used in the study:

$\Pr(Y = 1 / X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k) = \phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k)$; ϕ is the cumulative normal distribution function

Y = Participation in festival tourism; 0 = non participation, 1 = participation

X_i = Predictor variables; where $i=1 \dots k$

X_1 = Gender

X_2 = Age

X_3 = Monthly household income

X_4 = Dependency burden

X_5 = Employment and income opportunities; 0 = no, 1 = yes

X_6 = Skill enhancement opportunity; 0 = no, 1 = yes

X_7 = Establishment of external link; 0 = no, 1 = yes

5. Results and Discussion

The festival was organized by the state government in collaboration with the Hari Mandir committee in the year 2022 to give a boost to tourism activities in the post-Covid period. An area of 2.5 acres of land was designated for the festival centering the Mandir complex and was cordoned off as vehicle-free zone to facilitate free movement of people. Around 600 business stalls were permitted to function within and outside the Mandir complex. The festival exhibited exemplary communal harmony with participation of people from across religious faiths.

To give a fillip to entrepreneurship, the state government allocated a special zone in the festival site for showcasing the state's handicrafts and handloom heritage. Participants, which mainly included self-help groups, were selected by the National Small Industries Corporation from amongst the interested applicants. Rent-free space with basic amenities and free lunch were provided to the participants in that area. However, rent within the range of Rs.15,000—Rs.20,000 was imposed on businesses depending on the space occupied within the Mandir complex. Business stalls outside the complex had to pay rent to the space providers of permanent business establishments. In addition to rent for space occupation, each business stall had to pay Rs.50—Rs.100 per electricity point used.

The festival was organized on a grand scale. To manage the gala event, as many as 800 security personnel were deployed for 24 hours a day, ensuring that law and order was strictly maintained. The security personnel shouldered the burden of controlling huge traffic, keeping vigil on the sea of visitors, assisting missing persons, maintaining drunk-free and a molestation-free zone, providing

assistance to sick visitors, etc. Ready ambulance and fire fighting vehicles were kept on standby for meeting any exigency.

In the sphere of cultural programs, in addition to the local participants, the state government also invited well-known cultural troops and celebrities from across the country to perform and grace the occasion.

Perception of tourists on the Raas festival

To comprehend the perception of tourist visiting the Raas festival in the Nalbari district of Assam, a sample of 92 tourists has been randomly selected from the festival site. The demographic profile of the sample shows that 64.13% are males and 35.87% are females. Majority of the respondents visiting the festival are in the productive age group of 20-59 years and are engaged in private services (34.75%) and business (25%). 65.22% tourists are from within the state and 34.78% are from other states of India. Low-scale advertisement of the festival has restricted the outreach and hence, attracts less than potential visitors to the destination. 60.87% tourists have been found to visit the festival on recommendation of friends. While 63.04% of the visitors attended the festival for relaxation and entertainment, 29.35% wanted to experience the culture. Since Guwahati city is only 72 kms away from the festival site, tourists generally prefer to commute from the city to attend the festival and return by night. 47.83% of the visitors have been found to be day visitors only. Overnight visitors have been found to prefer home-stay facility (21.74%) and lodges (17.39%) as they are relatively low priced. 14.13% of the visitors stayed in hotels.

Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents had high perception on the availability of basic amenities, food and drinks, and handicrafts in the festival site. They were found to be happy with the cleanliness of the site as well. On the other hand, information relating to the festival, ease of travel to the festival site, availability of good quality accommodation, and maintenance of the festival site were perceived to be below expectations. Locals were also perceived to be less friendly.

Table 1. Perception of Tourists

Statements	Excellent (%)	Very good (%)	Good (%)	Satisfac-tory (%)	Poor (%)	Mean	Sd	Decision
Information on festival	29 (31.5)	36 (39.1)	17 (18.5)	19 (9.8)	1 (1.1)	2.10	.995	Low perception
Ease of travel to festival site	24 (26.1)	38 (41.3)	15 (16.3)	14 (15.2)	1 (1.1)	2.24	1.042	Low perception
Cleanliness of the site	11 (12.0)	32 (34.8)	28 (30.4)	19 (20.7)	2 (2.2)	2.66	1.009	High perception
friendliness of the people	25 (27.2)	40 (43.5)	13 (14.1)	13 (14.1)	1 (1.1)	2.18	1.026	Low perception
Availability of food & drinks	18 (19.6)	31 (33.7)	27 (29.3)	14 (15.2)	2 (2.2)	2.47	1.043	High perception
Availability of handicrafts	18 (19.6)	28 (30.4)	30 (32.6)	15 (16.3)	1 (1.1)	2.49	1.022	High perception
Basic amenities at site	6 (6.5)	24 (26.1)	29 (31.5)	32 (34.8)	1 (1.1)	2.98	.961	High perception
Availability of accomodation in the site	12 (13.0)	19 (20.7)	14 (15.2)	15 (16.3)	2 (2.2)	1.76	1.550	Low perception
Quality of Accomodationat site	7 (7.6)	13 (14.1)	25 (27.2)	15 (16.3)	2 (2.2)	1.93	1.588	Low perception
Maintenance of site	26 (28.3)	28 (30.4)	24 (26.1)	14 (15.2)	0	2.28	1.041	Low perception

Grand mean = 2.309

Source: Computed from primary data

The study also revealed that 91.30% visitors have been found to be impressed with the tight security arrangement by the administration and are willing to revisit and recommend the festival as a memorable cultural experience.

Economic Impact of Tourism

The Raas festival attracts a lot of visitors due to its religious and cultural significance. The expenditure incurred by the tourists visiting the festival does generate income via the multiplier effect. The total expenditure incurred by the sample population visiting the Raas Mahotsav is Rs.3, 99,500. If it is assumed that 30% of the tourist expenditure leaks out of the income stream by way of travel expenses outside the destination, procurement of goods for business from outside the local economy, and savings by businesses, a total of Rs.2,79,650 remains in the local economy. No tax has been imposed on the business by the state

government in the festival site. Hence, there is no leakage due to taxation. The capture rate, estimated as a ratio of final demand to tourists spending, is 61%. The direct sales effect is Rs.1,19,000.

Hence, the income multiplier has been estimated at 1.42. In other words, for every one rupee spent by the tourists in the destination, approximately an additional Rs.1.42 is generated. Thus, economic impact of tourist spending is Rs.2,40,406.34. This implies that if 92 tourists spend at the rate of Rs.1, 840.22 per day in the destination, a total of Rs.2, 40,406.34 will be generated in the local economy via the operation of the multiplier.

It may, therefore, be inferred that the festival has a huge potential of generating higher income that can propel growth and development of the local economy. To realize the true potential of festival tourism, it is imperative to develop tourism infrastructure and provide quality accommodation facilities which in turn will attract larger number of overnight visitors, thereby increasing destination spending leading to the generation of higher income.

Local Community and Festival Tourism

The huge inflow of devotees and tourists to the festival drives tourism-related activities, thereby, providing income-earning opportunities to the local community. The sample used to gauge the impact of the festival on the local community comprises 41.28% males and 58.72% females. 53.21% of the respondents are in the productive age group of 20-59 years. While majority of the respondents belong to the Hindu community (65.14%), 30.58% are Muslims. 51.38% are engaged in private jobs and 26.61% earn their livelihood from farming, poultry, and cattle-rearing. The sample population is characterized by low level of education. Only 14.68% are graduates and 6.12% are post-graduates.

The respondents have been found to be unanimous in their support for festival tourism as it enhances economic opportunities and infrastructure development in the area. In addition, the festival has strengthened community bond and has also helped in popularizing and preserving the cultural identity of the community.

Probit Model

The Probit regression estimates of the model used in the study are statistically significant as reflected by the Omnibus test, $X^2(9) = 125.974$, $p = .000$.

The results, reflected in table 2, show that males are 2.620 times more likely to participate in festival tourism activities than females. The negative beta coefficients of age and dependency burden (-0.015 and -0.093 respectively) indicate that as age and dependency burden increases, people are less likely to participate in tourism activities. It may be inferred that as dependency burden

increases, the households seek for permanent earning opportunities to augment their income. If the monthly household income in categories: less than 10,000, between 10,001—25,000, and between 25,001—50,000, increases by one unit compared to the greater than 50,000 income category, people are less likely to participate. On the other hand, a one unit increase in employment and income opportunity, skill enhancement opportunity, and establishment of external link scales, increased the people's odds of participation by 2.558, 2.345, 1.959 times respectively.

All the predictor variables have been found to be statistically significant as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Coefficient Estimates of Probit Regression

Parameter	B	Std. Error	95% Wald Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Test			Exp (B)
			Lower	Upper	Wald Chi-Square	df	Sig.	
(Intercept)	-.732	.5453	-1.801	.337	1.801	1	.180	.481
[Monthly household income=1]	-1.074	.3411	-1.742	-.405	9.909	1	.002	.342
[Monthly household income=2]	-.775	.3342	-1.430	-.120	5.376	1	.020	.461
[Monthly household income=3]	-.783	.3900	-1.547	-.018	4.029	1	.045	.457
[Mon_ income=4]	0 ^a	1
Gender	.963	.1801	.610	1.316	28.594	1	.000	2.620
Age	-.015	.0070	-.029	-.002	4.835	1	.028	.985
Dependency burden	-.093	.0436	-.178	-.008	4.547	1	.033	.911
Employment & income opportunity	.939	.2798	.391	1.488	11.270	1	.001	2.558
Improvement in skill	.852	.1915	.477	1.228	19.810	1	.000	2.345
External link	.672	.2248	.232	1.113	8.947	1	.003	1.959
(Scale)	1 ^b							

a. Reference category; b. Fixed at the displayed value

Source: Computed from primary data

Negative impacts:

Despite positively impacting livelihood in the local economy, the Raas festival is not bereft of challenges. The huge congregation of people does exert pressure on public utilities, waste management system, and the environment at large. The

noise pollution caused by loud speakers has irked many residents as it impinges on their private lives. The locals have opined that such noise pollution needs to be addressed through controlled mechanism. It has also been observed that the vehicle-free festival site has caused tremendous hardships on residents living in the site. They have voiced their inconveniences in commuting for work and are of the opinion that the duration of the festival should be reduced. Few local residents have also pointed to the commercialization of the festival with tradition being relegated to the background.

Accommodation Providers and Festival Tourism:

Though the Raas festival is an annual event and attracts a large number of tourists, yet there are only three hotels and four lodges in the town. Recently, a few home-stay facilities have started operation to cater to tourist demands. The hotels are relatively small in size with beds ranging from ten to thirty. On the other hand, the lodges have a capacity of six to ten beds.

The accommodation establishments have been found to do brisk business with 100% occupancy rate during the festival. The proprietors of the hotels and lodges have reported that they earn lucrative profit during the festival.

Since most of the accommodation establishments procure groceries, food, and other miscellaneous items from the local market, it may be inferred that the higher income generated via the operation of the multiplier remains in the local economy. Again, these establishments have been observed to employ two to ten local people depending on the scale of operation.

The accommodation providers have also been found to maintain strict vigil on waste management in order to preserve the environment. All wastes are collected and disposed by the municipality on payment of a monthly fee.

The owners firmly believe that development of tourism infrastructure in the destination will increase the number of overnight tourists to the festival and not only generate higher revenue, but also attract private investment.

6. Conclusion:

Unlike in the past, tourism is no longer confined to just a single sector. Its broad areas cover many activities including religion. This change has transformed tourism as an important engine of growth, generating employment and propelling economic development. Through the display of culture and tradition, festivals help to preserve the identity of a community, in addition to developing an area into an exciting leisure-destination for tourists.

Throughout history, festivals and fairs have assumed significant roles in societal and cultural engagements, serving as platforms to express and convey collective values, beliefs, and narratives that are integral to relatively-confined communities. Traditionally, festivals have been viewed as ritualistic and fleeting gatherings, wherein community members engage to reaffirm and commemorate diverse social, religious, ethnic, national, linguistic, or historical ties. While maintaining this fundamental function in modern contexts, festivals often assume multiple objectives, conveying poignant messages regarding identity, community, place and affiliation.

The Raas festival serves as a platform for the preservation and promotion of Assamese heritage that showcases the rich traditions, customs and artistic expressions of the region. The festival is, thus, viewed as a catalyst and a consequence of economic advancement. It epitomizes cultural gatherings centered on the showcasing of indigenous products and its marketing, all within a specific timeframe and location. The event serves as a window to the community and societal behaviors, fostering social inclusion. To achieve greater efficiency and cost effectiveness in the organization of the festival, it is important to draw a comprehensive tourism management plan inclusive of environmental protection.

The probit regression estimates bring to the fore the factors which are likely to influence participation of the local community in tourism activity. The estimated multiplier value, of greater than unity, gives a straightforward indication of a positive and significant economic impact of the tourist expenditure on the local economy. This will provide a guide to policy-makers and planners to strategically plan the festival and maximize the economic benefits for the state in general, and the local economy in particular. The study also highlights the perception of tourists on various aspects related to the festival. It indicates the areas where intervention is necessary for better organization of the festival. Though the growth and development in terms of the festival area, scale of organization, business pattern, and number of visitors, have all shown an upward trend, it is pertinent to strike a balance between resource usage and carrying capacity of the destination, so as to ensure sustainable tourism development without diluting the cultural ethos of the community.

To unleash the real potential of the Raas festival and place the festival on the global tourism map, it is pertinent that the Assam state government collaborates with the local administration and all the stakeholders for strategic planning and implementation of policy decisions. Based on the findings of the study, it is imperative to give wide publicity of the festival. To attract tourists from the country and abroad, detailed information relating to the festival may be provided in the state government tourism portal, print, electronic, and social media. Provision of ease of travel, comfortable and safe accommodation with basic amenities, provision of resting sheds and safe drinking water in the festival site,

and improvement in local transport and communication facilities will encourage repeated visits and generate referrals, resulting in increased volume of tourist. Local entrepreneurs may be encouraged to invest in infrastructure development projects through incentives and subsidies. It is incumbent on the state government to maintain law and order and enforce strict vigil on the waste management system to protect the environment and make the festival sustainable for posterity.

7. Future Scope of Study:

With the festival gaining popularity in the country and beyond, all the venues have been able to attract huge inflow of visitors. The present study has been based on the festival celebrated in the Nalbari town. Hence, the results obtained are reflective of the impact of the festival in the state.

A comprehensive picture on the impact of the Raas festival in the state can emerge if samples are collected from all the festival sites. As the festival grows in scale, it will open doors for larger participation and the spread effect will generate more employment and income opportunities. Such an attempt may enable the policy makers to design a strategy that will exploit the true potential of the festival in boosting tourism development in the state.

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