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A case study of heritage tourism stakeholders during the post-pandemic period in Assam, North-East India

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Abstract

Given India's historical significance, vibrant culture, diverse ecology, topography, and natural attractions, the northeastern part of the country offers enormous potential for tourism. Tourism is one of the most distressed industries due to COVID-19 outbreak. This paper examines the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on the tourism sector and discusses how the stakeholders engaged in various tourism-related services are preparing for the new normal by strengthening heritage tourism destinations. Also, the support system of the Indian government to ensure the sector's sustainability is analyzed in the study. The study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. Information was gathered through interviews and published materials about the unique UNESCO-recognized heritage site Kaziranga National Park, which is situated in the state of Assam, North-East India. Transformation is essential when the crisis is seen as a chance to reassess tourism going forward. The study's findings indicated that to create a long-lasting, resilient tourism economy; stakeholders must be more resourceful and creative to tackle the post-pandemic situation.

Keywords: Tourism stakeholders, adoption strategies, pandemic, sustainability, heritage tourism

1. Introduction

Tourism continues to be one of the important sectors worst hit by the coronavirus pandemic, and the stance remains highly uncertain. Regarding projected long-term (10-year) growth, the Indian travel and tourism industry ranked 5th and was predicted to become the world's second-largest employment maker by 2019. In 2009, it contributed approximately 6% of GDP and 6.4% of overall employment or one per 15.6 jobs, and that percentage has steadily increased over time. The tourism sector contributed 9.2% to India's GDP, generating INR 16.91 lakh crore (\$220 billion) and providing 42.673 million jobs in 2018, which accounted for 8.1% of the total employment in the country, as per the World Travel and Tourism Council [24]. To achieve a target of INR 32.05 lakh crore (\$430 billion) by 2028, the industry needs to grow annually at a rate of 6.9%.

Being the most labor-intensive sector, COVID-19 slowed down the tourism industry putting numerous jobs at risk, which befuddled the efforts to advance sustainable development goals. The drop in tourist arrivals severely impacted the tourism-related sectors, such as tourist lodges, hotels, resorts, and all the stakeholders engaged in tourism and allied activities. By contrasting the past and present crises brought on by COVID-19, the World Travel & Tourism Council specified that as a way to address these circumstances, tourism stakeholders must work together. Governments must take into account the longer-term effects of the crisis while utilizing digitization to assist and promote the structural reforms required to build a more resilient, sustainable, and robust tourism industry [23].

Sustainability is extensively viewed as a "vehicle" to beat the hazards caused by tourism for long-term survival. Environmental, economic, and social factors play a significant role in attaining sustainability in the tourism sector [20]. The three key elements to attain sustainable tourism development goals can be outlined as (i) meeting the immediate and long-term needs of local people to raise their living conditions; (ii) satisfying visitors' demands; and (iii) protecting the environment to accomplish the first two objectives^{3, 10}. Before promoting sustainable tourism development, the stakeholders should first evaluate their level of familiarity with its guiding principles [2]. Resilient thinking is needed to manage the tourism industry as a system that is susceptible to shocks [22]. This comprises behaviours that enhance the system's capacity to maintain some stability, such as persistence, adaptability, and transformation [6].

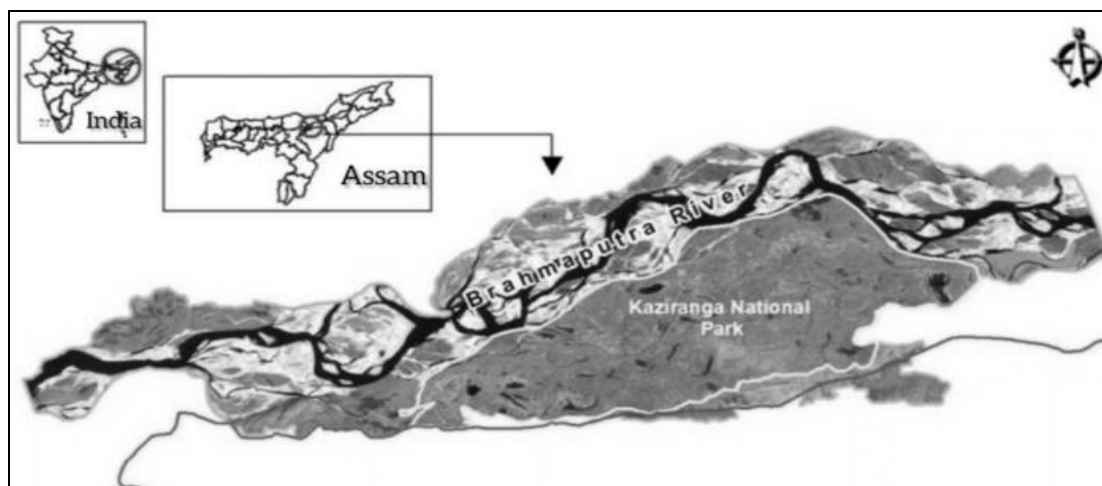
A protective mechanism known as resilience assists people to grow in the wake of risk or adversity^[5]. Stakeholders' capacity for innovation can be improved by strengthening their resilience. The capacity of the stakeholders in a tourism location to absorb shocks depends on preparation, foresight, and reactivity. It involves both a decentralization process and a group effort^[4].

In essence, an adaptation strategy is a coping mechanism that involves humans planning a pattern of behaviour or actions to satisfy the bare minimum requirements and address challenges^[9, 14, 19]. In response to internal shocks like social inequity and political unrest as well as external causes like changes in the global economic storm, systems become more resilient when adaptation and innovation are combined. The cognitive resilience can be used to gauge the viability of tourist destinations when examined from the outlook of a system^[11]. According to a general definition, sustainability refers to a system's ability to adapt in a way that fosters opportunity and innovation^[7]. Parsons in his

Structural-Functional Theory specified four functional imperatives all social structures must have to exist: (a) adaptation or the society must be able to adapt and interact with its environment, (b) goal attainment or it must have the ability to set goals and make decisions accordingly for the future, (c) integration or it must ensure that the societal norms and values are in harmony and convergent to achieve integration, and (d) latency or it must maintain the patterns that support integration in the society^[13].

1.1 Significance of the study

Assam is home to various ethnic groups and tribes, and each of these groups has its own set of distinctive socio-cultural characteristics including language, religious beliefs and customs, way of life, culture, festival, food habit, songs, and dances. All these different cultural activities make Assam a diverse mix of cultural heritage, having a great potential for tourists' attraction.



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-study-area-Kaziranga-National-Park_fig1_342571720

Fig 1: Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India

Figure 1, Kaziranga National Park is located in the north eastern state Assam, India. The world's biggest population of one-horned rhinoceroses, as well as a broad variety of other creatures, live in the Kaziranga National Park, a riverine grassland bordered by forests. At the base of the Mikir Hills, the park is located on the southern bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra. The leading natural heritage Kaziranga National Park is placed in the Golaghat and Nagaon districts of Assam, on the periphery of the Eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot. The park was designated as a UNESCO recognized World Heritage Site in 1985. The park is home to over 2200 Indian one-horned rhinoceroses (almost 2/3 of their global population), live in the 430 square kilometer area of Kaziranga National Park, which is dotted with swampy lagoons, and elephant-grass meadows, and dense woods. Along with this, the park serves as a breeding site for elephants, swamp deer, and wild water buffaloes. In the year 2006, the National Park of Kaziranga was declared as a tiger reserve because the area's tiger population has grown over time. Additionally, the park is also an Important Bird Area as recognized by the Bird Life

International for the conservation of various avian species. Table 1. Tourist Inflow to National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in Assam during 2014-2021. As evidenced by the rise in visitors, the tourism industry has become a prominent sector in Kaziranga National Park. The total number of tourist inflow to Kaziranga National Park was 515666 in 2014-15 and increased to 630253 in 2018-19. In 2019, Kaziranga had about 106844 fewer visitors than in 2017-18. This decline in visitor numbers can be attributed to protests that arose following the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) on December 11, 2019. And thereafter, the COVID-19 pandemic has badly affected the tourism sector in Kaziranga National Park. However, in comparison to other national five national parks in Assam, Kaziranga receives the highest tourists' pressure. Kaziranga popularity is partly due to its iconic one-horned rhinoceros population and successful conservation efforts. Nevertheless, other parks in Assam offer diverse wildlife experiences and scenic landscapes, and they have been gaining recognition and drawing visitors seeking a more offbeat wildlife experience.

Table 1: Tourist inflow to national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in assam during 2014-2021

National Parks & Wildlife Sanctuaries	2014-15		2015-16		2016-17		2017-18		2018-19		2019-20		2020-21	
	DT	FT	DT	FT	DT	FT	DT	FT	DT	FT	DT	FT	DT	FT
Kaziranga	510854	4812	772630	5211	610051	6719	730195	6902	625128	5125	130937	6073	123561	278
Nameri	81024	1041	95015	2015	101289	2805	82581	2735	65124	2380	5044	97	0	0
Manas	9878	799	29641	1575	10500	1681	10105	1725	1295	1505	18233	98	55272	7
Dibru-Saikhowa	26389	250	37946	225	292105	201	118268	125	22168	49	601	4	461	0
Orang	18298	289	48561	189	15156	241	25169	180	12991	100	992	14	0	0
Pabitora	131102	486	189102	310	181264	304	295129	503	205258	309	11514	218	14900	2
Total	777545	7677	1172895	9525	1210365	11951	1261447	12170	931964	9468	167321	6504	194194	287

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam.
DT=Domestic Tourist, FT=Foreign Tourist.

A vital element of sustainability is resilience; thus, to achieve resilience in tourist destinations, it is crucial to enhance their capacity to withstand internal changes and external shocks. To attain this goal, it is necessary to have adaptability, the capacity to change, strong social and natural capital, healthy social networks, supportive local leadership, economic potential through diversification, and effective governance. To strike a balance between preservation and development, it is essential to implement a sustainable tourism strategy as well as a tourist resilience strategy. Destinations are compelled by sustainable tourism to make preparations for a number of potential catastrophes. The involvement of tourism stakeholders is crucial for sustainable management of tourism destinations [21].

Both central and state governments have launched programmes to aid tourism workers impacted by the pandemic, namely, the Parjatan Sanjivani Scheme (September 2020) as a means of relief to the COVID-19 pandemic to support the tourism stakeholders providing a working capital term loan based on current bank norms; Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (May 2020) towards making India self-reliant while the Market Development Assistance (MDA) scheme promotes domestic tourism and provides maximum benefits to the stakeholders.

1.2 Aim of the Study

This study seeks to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on India’s tourism industry. The research will also discuss the strategies adopted by tourism industry stakeholders for gearing up under the new normal to maintain the resilience of heritage tourism destinations like Kaziranga National Park. This paper also explains the government strategies for supporting the workers engaged in tourism industry to maintain the sustainability of this industry during the post-pandemic period.

2. Research Methods

With a focus on case studies, the analysis is both qualitative and quantitative. A case study research has been undertaken due to the existence of a correlation between initiatives created to cope with the severe effects of the COVID-19 epidemic, and the capability of stakeholders to boost tourism in a sustainably viable way. The study area is Kaziranga National Park, located in the heart of the North-Eastern state of Assam.

The study uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data are gathered through in-depth interviews conducted during the time period December 2021 to November 2022. The points covered in the interview include the adverse effects of COVID-19, the post-pandemic situation, and measures to sustainably manage the impacts of the

pandemic. From a variety of sources, secondary data are gathered viz. statistical databases, published government reports, documents, and information related to the Kaziranga National Park and other imperative tourism destinations of Assam.

The purposive sampling method is used to select the data sources by categorizing work portfolios and their contributions to tourism undertakings in and around the Kaziranga National Park. This study involves 64 informants consisting of 4 local government representatives, 10 representing tourism professional associations, and 50 people engaged in various tourism-related activities and local stakeholders. The distribution of 50 tourism stakeholders according to their employment category is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of employment of the surveyed stakeholders

Category	Stakeholders' Job Distribution
Resorts/Hotels	12
Restaurants	8
Art & Handicraft Stores	5
Tourist Transport Operators	5
Local Transport Operators	5
Zeep Safari Owners	10
Tour Guides	5
Total	50

Source: Field survey during 2021-22.

This study employs an interactive data analysis method. This approach, as described by Miles and Huberman¹², entails four sequential steps: Data collection, data reduction, data analysis and demonstration, and drawing a conclusion. In qualitative research, data validation is accomplished by triangulation of data, which makes use of additional information for data verification or comparison

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 COVID-19 Impact on India’s Tourism Industry with Reference to Kaziranga National Park

India has relied heavily on tourism as a source of foreign exchange earnings. The sector experienced significant growth from 3.4 billion USD in 2000 to 28.59 billion USD in 2018. By 2022, the Ministry of Tourism aimed to generate USD 50 billion in tourism-related revenue, but the COVID-19 pandemic caused foreign exchange earnings to drop to USD 6.15 billion in 2020. Lockdowns and restrictions led to a significant decrease in tourist arrival in 2020 [18].

The tourism industry was severely affected by the coronavirus outbreak, leading to a decline in foreign visitors and non-resident Indians arriving in India to 6.33 million in

2020, down from 18 million in 2019. India witnessed a decline in domestic tourist visits in 2020, with around 610 million visits made, which was 2322 million fewer than the previous year [18]. Despite observing a significant surge in local tourism from 220 million visits in 2000 to the present time, the coronavirus pandemic halted the trend in 2020. Additionally, the cancellation of numerous occasions, celebrations, and festivals resulted in a significant loss of employment for many organizers and businesses. Therefore, scholars have referred to the pandemic as a recipe for disaster [17].

3.2 Impact of Lockdown on Kaziranga National Park (KNP)

Tourism in Kaziranga National Park experienced a significant decline during its peak season due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to S. Pandey, the Public

Relations Officer for the Assam Forest Minister. The industry is now in need of restoration after the lockdown has ended. The tourism department of Assam estimates that 2 lakh people who rely directly on tourism have been affected by the pandemic, and an additional 5 lakh people who rely indirectly on tourism have also been partially affected [1]. The closure of popular tourist attractions during the second wave of the pandemic, as a result of total lockdown enforcement, has had a profound impact on various stakeholders in the tourism industry.

The KNP tourism sector has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a challenging phase where many tourism stakeholders have lost their jobs and income. This has forced many of them to switch occupations and look for alternative professions in other sectors which is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Percentage variation in occupation change and monthly earnings of the surveyed stakeholders due to pandemic

Occupation Before Pandemic	Total Employment	Occupation Change	Occupation Change (%)	Earning Before Pandemic	Earning After Pandemic	Change in Earnings (%)	Occupation After Pandemic
Workers in Resorts/Hotels	185	42	3.4	1071000	765800	0.39	Delivery Services/Farming/Own Fast Food Stall/Private Company
Workers in Restaurants	48	6	7	149300	67800	1.20	Tiffin Service/Farming/ Fishing/ Dairy & Livestock
Art & Handicraft Stores	22	6	2.67	135000	95100	0.42	Agricultural Activities/Furniture/Nursery
Tourist Transport Operators	10	2	4	98500	45500	1.17	Driving School/ Distribution Services
Local Transport Operators	18	2	8	45500	31500	0.44	Livestock/ Farming
Jeep Safari Owners	32	6	4.33	3287450	205650	14.99	Farming /Hotel/ Homestay
Tour Guides	12	3	3	624500	46500	12.43	Private Company
Total	327	67	3.88	5411250	1257850	3.31	

Source: Field survey during 2021-22.

Table 3 shows the change in occupation of the tourism stakeholders or the workers engaged in various tourism-related activities before and after the pandemic. Earning before and after pandemic has shown the monthly earnings of the surveyed tourism stakeholders or employers of the surveyed sample unit and has no link with the income of the workers who switched their occupations after the pandemic. There were a total of 327 tourism workers in the surveyed sample units and 3.88 percent had to change their occupation during and after the pandemic for survival purposes, showing a total of 3.31 percent change in earnings of the owners of the different tourism services.

According to the tourism department of Assam, the park lost INR 12 million in revenue for April and May 2020. The park brought about INR 57 million from entry fees and other activity charges for visitors in the year 2017-18, which declined to INR 48 million in the following two years 2018-19 and 2019-20. The park remains closed between June and September because of the annual floods and reopens in the month of November. However, the COVID-19 lockdown, which began on March 17, 2020, and the subsequent closure of all national parks and wildlife sanctuaries by the Assam government on May 3, 2021, severely impacted the tourism industry. Despite reopening on October 21, the park has already lost 30% of its revenue in the current financial year, although over 120,960 people have visited the park so far, an official said.

It is crucial for tourism stakeholders to maintain their resilience despite the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic. A successful adaptation to risks or challenges is resilience. Innovation and adaptation are two of the primary components of resilience. For tourist companies, communities, and destinations, resilience is a crucial notion.

As a result, those who work in the tourism industry must develop original, inventive, sustainable enterprises and products that will remain appealing [4].

3.3 Adaption strategies of stakeholders engaged in the tourism sector for the new normal in KNP during the Pandemic and Aftermath

As of March 17, 2020, the Kaziranga National Park has remained closed, and this has affected various stakeholders, including auto rickshaw drivers, travel agents, hoteliers, bus operators, tour guides, and vendors in the vicinity of tourist spots. According to a tour guide with 15 years of experience, many tour guides are struggling to support their families due to the pandemic over the past few months. "It has been extremely difficult for tour guides to deal with such a situation for the second year in a row. Many of them have borrowed heavily to cover their basic needs since they are unable to pay their dues," he continued. A tourism organization founder stressed the need for the tourism industry to adapt to the new normal travel scenario post the COVID-19 pandemic. He also emphasized the significance of ethical and sustainable tourism practices.

Tourism, being the only source of income, some expressed their interest to learn another skill to change their profession worrying about their family's future. Since the lockdown, life has been a big zero, said a tourist shuttle driver, who went on to explain that he was unemployed. During the tourist season, which runs from November to April, they earn for six months and spend that income for the rest of the year. According to the state tourism department, 440 owners of safari vehicles in Kaziranga suffered a loss of around INR 46 million during the tourist season. Local entrepreneurs in Kohora's little market are equally upset

about how the pandemic has affected even hyper-local supply networks. Many people in the areas near Kaziranga National Park are turning to farm to support their families. The inhabitants of the communities surrounding KNP are pleading with the authorities for assistance. The leader of the Kaziranga Jeep Safari Association has urged the government to provide a suitable compensation package to cover the losses incurred due to pandemic and not impose any restrictions on tourists during the upcoming season. However, government assistance has been insufficient. In 2020, the former chief minister of Assam declared a one-off payment of INR 2,000 (USD 26) per individual to 470 jeep drivers and safari elephant owners. Later in September 2020, the government introduced the "Parjyatan Sanjivani Scheme" to aid tourism stakeholders by providing a working capital loan of Rs. 1 lakh to 20 lakhs from banks at an 8-10 percent interest rate, with the interest payable after the year's end. However, in the Assam Budget, the finance minister declared that the working capital term loan would be based on current bank norms, which the travel industry has criticized as the government failing to fulfill its earlier promises. Many prominent tourism industry stakeholders of Assam are reportedly considering selling off a substantial portion of their shares to companies outside the state in an attempt to survive the tremendous losses suffered in business due to pandemic. In order to carry out post-pandemic tourism activities successfully, it is essential to

encourage attitudes of compliance and discipline with protocols and health standards as well as positivism, fascination, and resilience. Resilience refers to the ability to bounce back, rebound, or recover from adversity or disaster. Resilience is a protective system that enables people to survive despite challenging circumstances ^[5].

The Assam state government and Kaziranga National Park authorities have agreed to resume tourism partially from October 1, 2020. It is expected that as KNP reopens for tourism-related activities, tourism professionals will gradually return to work in the industry. In order to cope with a pandemic, self-resilience is necessary, as the ability to adapt to changing circumstances is critical.

Table 4 provides information on the percentage variation in daily tourist inflow before and after the COVID-19 pandemic based on the observed sample survey. The table is organized into different categories of tourist-related businesses or services, and it includes data on the number of tourists before and after the pandemic, as well as the variation in tourist numbers expressed as a percentage. Overall, the total number of tourists decreased from 1,421 to 896 after the pandemic, representing a 58.59% decrease in tourist numbers. This table provides valuable insights into how various sectors of the tourist industry were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with most categories experiencing a significant decline in tourist numbers.

Table 4: Percentage variation in daily tourist inflow before and after pandemic from the observed sample survey

Category	Tourists before Pandemic		Tourists after Pandemic		Tourist Variation (%)
	Total	Per Unit	Total	Per Unit	
Resorts/Hotels	606	50.5	396	33	53.03
Restaurants	341	42.63	209	26.13	63.15
Art & Handicraft Stores	136	27.2	72	14.4	88.89
Tourist Transport Operators	50	10	25	5	100
Local Transport Operators	78	15.6	59	11.8	32.2
Jeep Safari Owners	150	15	100	10	50
Tour Guides	60	12	35	7	71.43
Total	1421	17.89	896	43.87	58.59

Source: Field survey during 2021-22.

Table 5 represents information on the percentage variation in seasonal employment before and after the COVID-19 pandemic based on the observed sample survey. Similar to Table 4, this table is organized into different categories related to the tourist industry.

It includes data on employment figures before and after the pandemic, as well as the variation in employment expressed as a percentage. Following the pandemic, there was an overall decline in employment of 25.77%, from 327 to 260 across all categories.

Table 6 presents data on the percentage variation in seasonal monthly income before and after the COVID-19 pandemic based on the observed sample survey. The table is organized into different categories related to the tourist industry and includes data on income figures before and after the pandemic, as well as the variation in income expressed as a percentage. Throughout the pandemic, the overall income generated across every segment dropped from 2,171,700 to 1,899,130, a 14.35% decrease. Additionally, the mean income per unit decreased.

Table 5: Percentage variation in seasonal employment before and after pandemic from the observed sample survey

Category	Employment before Pandemic		Employment after Pandemic		Employment Variation (%)
	Total	Per Unit	Total	Per Unit	
Resorts/Hotels	185	15.42	143	11.92	29.37
Restaurants	48	6	42	5.25	14.28
Art & Handicraft Stores	22	4.4	16	3.2	37.5
Tourist Transport Operators	10	2	8	1.6	25
Local Transport Operators	18	3.6	16	3.2	12.5
Jeep Safari Owners	32	3.2	26	2.6	23.08
Tour Guides	12	2.4	9	1.8	33.33
Total	327	6.54	260	5.2	25.77

Source: Field survey during 2021-22.

Table 6: Percentage variation in seasonal monthly income before and after pandemic from the observed sample survey

Category	Income before Pandemic		Income after Pandemic		Income Variation (%)
	Total	Per Unit	Total	Per Unit	
Resorts/Hotels	1266000	105500	1150350	95862.5	10.05
Restaurants	214850	26856.25	185600	23200	15.76
Art & Handicraft Stores	75450	15090	58950	11790	27.99
Tourist Transport Operators	155800	31160	129250	25850	20.54
Local Transport Operators	78550	15710	65480	13096	19.96
Zeep Safari Owners	312500	31250	255000	25500	22.54
Tour Guides	68550	13710	54500	10900	25.78
Total	2171700	239276.3	1899130	206198.5	14.35

Source: Field survey during 2021-22.

Table 7 provides information on the employment elasticity and income elasticity of tourism in Sivasagar District of Assam. These elasticities measure the responsiveness of employment and income to changes in the tourism industry within various categories. Employment elasticity measures the percentage change in employment for a given percentage change in tourism activity. For example, a value of 0.5538 for Resorts/Hotels means that a 1% increase in tourism activity in this category would lead to a 0.5538% increase in employment. Income elasticity measures the

percentage change in income for a given percentage change in tourism activity. For instance, a value of 0.1895 for Resorts/Hotels means that a 1% increase in tourism activity in this category would lead to a 0.1895% increase in income. These elasticity values are crucial for understanding how changes in the tourism industry impact employment and income within Sivasagar District. They indicate the sensitivity of these economic factors to fluctuations in tourism activity for each category and overall.

Table 7: Employment and income multiplier of tourism in Sivasagar District of Assam

Category	Employment Elasticity	Income Elasticity
Resorts/Hotels	0.5538	0.1895
Restaurants	0.2261	0.2496
Art & Handicraft Stores	0.4219	0.3149
Tourist Transport Operators	0.2500	0.2054
Local Transport Operators	0.3882	0.6199
Zeep Safari Owners	0.4616	0.4508
Tour Guides	0.4666	0.3609
Total	0.4398	0.2449

Source: Field survey during 2021-22.

As shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6, percentage variation in employment (25.77) and tourist inflow (58.59) are greater than the percentage variation in income (14.35). Table 7 shows the employment-income multiplier where employment elasticity is higher than the elasticity of income. Nevertheless, with the rapid increase in price of goods and services just after the pandemic, loss in earning has more significant impact on the tourism stakeholders. To revive the tourism industry, promoting domestic and local tourism and implementing new normal practices are essential. Domestic tourism would rebound more quickly than international tourism, according to a statement made by the International Labour Organization in 2020, which is already visible on the ground.

3.4 Government strategies in supporting the tourism stakeholders to retain sustainability

The Indian Tourism Ministry has established Sustainable Tourism Criteria (STCI) for various fragments of the tourism sector viz., hospitality sector, tour operators, natural tourism resources like lakes and rivers, beaches and backwaters. These criteria are applicable nationwide. In January 2020, the Ministry introduced the "Dekho Apna Desh" project to promote domestic tourism in India. Additionally, the Responsible Tourism Society of India (RTSOI) was established to promote sustainable tourism practices, targeting various tourism stakeholders such as

hoteliers and resort managers, tour operators and tourist guides, transportation industry personnel, and the government departments such as forest, culture, museums, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), district officials etc. On December 8, 2020, the Ministry of Tourism in India released revised guiding principles for recognizing tourism stakeholders, which would be effective from January 2021 for encouraging Start-Ups under the scheme of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'. To revive and rejuvenate the domestic tourism sector and derive maximum advantages for stakeholders, the Ministry has modified the rules for the Scheme of Market Development Aid (MDA). As a part of the marketing plans for the domestic tourism market, stakeholders are encouraged to promote a variety of tourist locations across the nation, including under-explored and undiscovered ones.

The Ministry of Tourism places great importance on developing and promoting tourism in the North-Eastern states of India. To achieve this, various initiatives have been implemented, including promoting tourism products in international markets through major travel fairs and exhibitions, organizing Familiarization Tours (FAM) under the Ministry's Hospitality Scheme, promoting local fairs, festivals, and other events, developments in the field of information and technology, conducting publicity drives, offering market expansion assistance, promoting market research, and so on. The Ministry has also encouraged training programs for those engaged in tourism industry,

such as courses on marketing assistance, training for managing tourism destinations, tour guides, and managing homestays.

Although government initiatives for the tourism industry during COVID-19 are suboptimal, people are adaptive. Improvements by the government, particularly at local and regional levels, are needed to support the resilience of tourism destinations. This includes financial aid, marketing campaigns to boost domestic tourism, and infrastructure development for long-term visitor attraction. Additionally, measures to ensure the health and safety of travelers and employees in the tourism industry are critical. Collaborative efforts between the government and the tourism industry are necessary for the sustainability and recovery of tourism destinations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.5 Structural-functional theory and research findings model

Talcott Parsons developed the Structural-Functional Theory in the 1950s. It recognizes that society is a social system [16]. In this sense, Kaziranga National Park is an integral part of this system that necessitates the participation of all stakeholders in the tourism industry to maintain its resilience. To build resilience in nature-based tourism destinations, stakeholder involvement is crucial [15]. The AGIL paradigm outlines four functions that a system must perform: adaptability, goal accomplishment, integration, and latency.

The system must handle external circumstantial demands, such as those posed by the environment, through the adaptation function and modify the environment to meet those needs. Each stakeholder studies the circumstances that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic as part of the adaptation process. In response to the pandemic, people must follow health precautions, especially in the tourism industry, which prioritizes cleanliness, health, and safety factors [8]. The "new normal" adaptation strategy aims to reduce COVID-19 cases, and community conformity to health protocols is crucial for achieving common goals. With increased awareness, tourism in KNP can quickly recover. The system's components must work together as a whole as part of the integration function. All tourist stakeholders in the tourism industry must be able to collaborate and prevent potential disputes through integration.

The maintenance of patterns, or latency function, requires the system to maintain, complement and renew cultural prototypes and individual motivations that create and maintain those motivations. Latency emphasizes how important it is for tourism stakeholders to uphold the values that are part of their social context. For this function, a procedure of evaluation would be used to every step taken throughout the new normal adaptation to ensure that education and socialization continue to persuade people to reconsider travelling to Kaziranga National Park. For tourism to recover fast and for economic activity to get back up, maintenance of patterns needs to be there to lower the risk of COVID-19 infection. This is urgent to attain

functional tourism stakeholder functions under the AGIL (adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency) paradigm of Structural-Functional Theory, which outlines the societal functions required for social stability.

The four functional imperatives for all social structures to exist are integration, adaptation, goal attainment, and latency. According to Parsons, integration involves society's ability to interact with the environment, adaptation and goal attainment refer to the ability to set and achieve future goals and make decisions accordingly, and the harmonization of the entire society. Harmonization of the society depends on the solidity and convergence of societal values and norms, and latency pertains to the maintenance of latent patterns.

Parsons' functional scheme consists of four components, the first component which is collective in KNP includes: all tourism stakeholders comprising local government, academics, workers and business owners, society and media. The second component is the desired goal, which aligns with societal values. In KNP, the goal is to increase the resilience of tourism stakeholders, generate social resilience, and sustainably revitalize the industry via new normal adjustments. The third element is the setting, which describes how the goal is achieved in the existing circumstances, including infrastructure and stipulations that may pose a challenge to achieving the goal. However, the challenge is that not everyone would follow the health procedures when they were first put in place. Awareness campaigns and instruction on the value of following health protocols are needed as a remedy. The fourth component is normative standards, where tourism industry performers must comply with several regulations or standards to achieve goals. KNP must follow an adaptation procedure to preserve consistency and reliability by adhering to applied guidelines, such as cleanliness, health, safety, and environmental sustainability-CHSE practices for conducting tourism activities during the pandemic and even post-pandemic period.

2.6 Novelty and Limitation of the study

The novelties of the study are as follows (i) the reviving study on the Kaziranga National Park of North-East India during the post COVID era is solely analyzed in this study; (ii) the study offers a thorough analysis of the resilience capacity of tourism stakeholders' which indicates another novelty of the study. (iii) The novel observation found is that the unskilled labourers ended up doing physical labour during the pandemic period.

The research results may have limited generalizability because of the chosen research approach. Since this is a case study focusing on a specific region (Assam, North-East India), the findings may not be directly applicable to other regions or countries with different heritage tourism contexts. Time constraints, the post-pandemic period can be dynamic, and the study's time-frame may not cover all the changes and developments that could occur over a more extended period. Researchers should acknowledge and discuss these limitations in the study to ensure transparency and encourage future research in the field

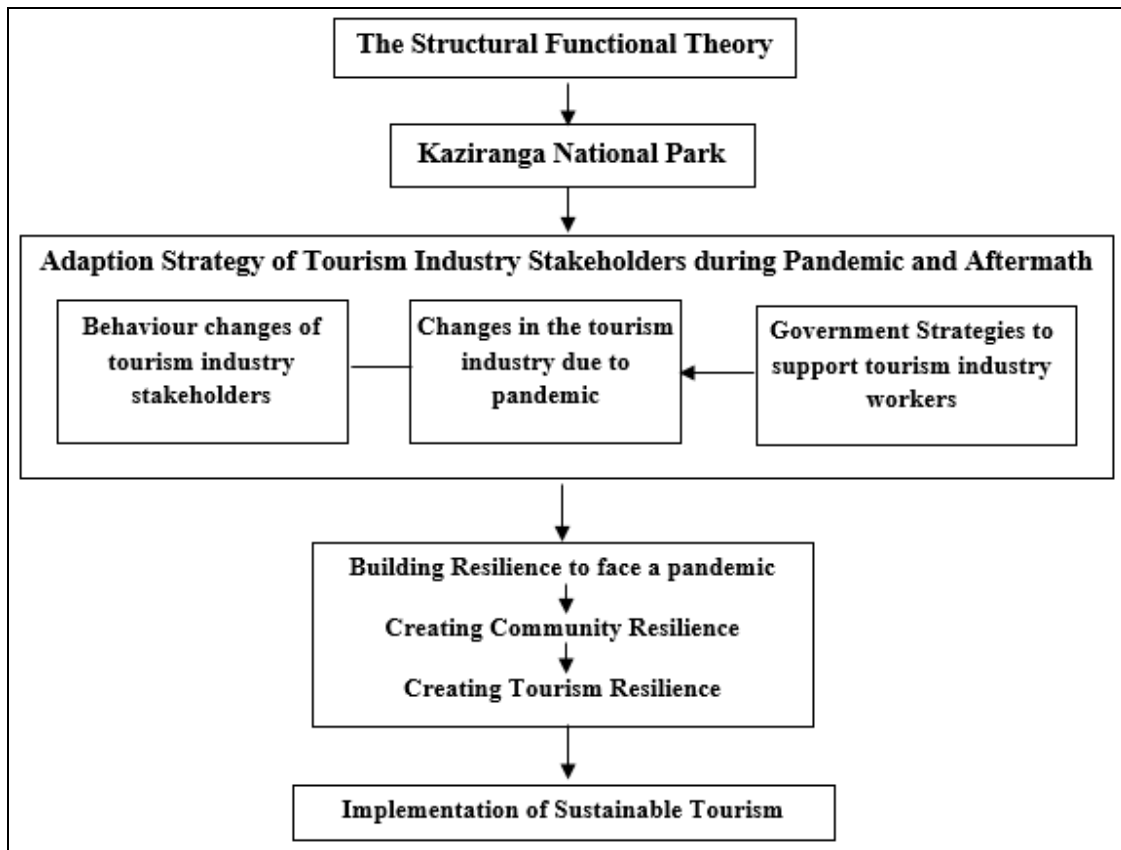


Fig 2: Research Findings Model

3. Conclusions

The findings of the study indicate that due to financial difficulties, though the majority of the children of tourism industry workers are attending school or college, while some older children are working as part-time hawkers, fishing, and vegetable vendors in the daily huts to support their families. In such an emerging situation, in the race for survival of the fittest, tourism industry workers must be innovative and creative to survive. They have adapted to preserve the viability of natural heritage tourism destinations during the post-COVID period, and those with multiple skills are better equipped to handle different job opportunities. Conversely, those without other skills are limited to jobs requiring physical labor. Some tourism industry employees are currently working in other industries in order to survive, but plan to return to their primary jobs once the industry stabilizes. The government's approach to promote resilience in tourism destinations focuses on providing social support and implementing programs that will prepare industry stakeholders for future tourist visits. This study is anticipated to offer a thorough analysis of the tourism stakeholders' resilience in natural heritage tourism and other types of tourist destinations. The tourism stakeholders are suggested to follow the trending CHSE protocols, which emphasize cleanliness, health, safety, and environmental sustainability, and continue to produce innovative products to meet the needs of tourists and cope with the shifting circumstances of the post-pandemic era. However, the government's efforts to support tourism stakeholders during the pandemic have fallen short, and a new strategy is necessary to moderate the adverse effects of COVID-19 on tourism-related industries. The study is also expected to expand the scope of future research into

different types of tourism destinations, including cultural, historical, and archaeological sites.

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