



From monuments to markets: Linking historical heritage and local economy in Sivasagar

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic relationship between heritage tourism and local economic development in the historic town of Sivasagar, Assam, with a special focus on the areas surrounding the iconic Ahom-era monuments, Rang Ghar and Kareng Ghar. As the former capital of the Ahom dynasty, Sivasagar is a treasure trove of architecture, history and living culture. The study explores how increasing tourist interest has led to the organic emergence and growth of local enterprises, including tea stalls, fast food vendors and handicraft sellers near these monuments.

These small businesses have transformed the spaces around Rang Ghar and Kareng Ghar into vibrant economic zones that provide livelihood opportunities to local people—especially women, youth and artisans from nearby villages. Starting as informal stalls offering tea and snacks, many of these enterprises have now evolved into stable sources of income and community empowerment. Handicraft sellers have tapped into the demand for meaningful souvenirs, offering handmade products that reflect Assamese heritage through the use of bamboo, cane, clay and traditional weaving techniques. These crafts not only generate income but also help preserve endangered cultural skills and promote a sense of pride in local identity.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the multiplier effect of these businesses on the wider local economy. From sourcing raw materials and food ingredients locally to supporting transport providers, the growth of these micro-enterprises strengthens various sectors of the community. Educational tours, in particular, act as a catalyst for economic activity by creating regular, dependable demand for goods and services. Students and teachers contribute to the informal economy by purchasing snacks and souvenirs, thereby supporting the livelihoods of many small-scale vendors.

The paper also emphasizes the need for integrating these economic activities with heritage conservation and responsible tourism practices. When tourists engage with local culture through food, crafts, and personal interactions they develop a deeper respect for the heritage they are exploring. This enriches their travel experience and encourages them to promote and protect the site. With proper support from local authorities—such as designated vending zones, hygiene training and tourism awareness—these micro-businesses can become an essential part of sustainable tourism models.

The emergence of local enterprises around the monuments is a compelling example of how heritage tourism can foster inclusive, grassroots economic development. By weaving together cultural preservation, community participation and tourism-driven livelihood generation, Sivasagar sets a promising example of how historical monuments can serve not only as reminders of the past but also as engines of progress for the future.

Keywords: Sivasagar, tourism, ahom monuments, local economy, economic development

Introduction

Sivasagar, located in the northeastern state of Assam, is a region steeped in history, culture and natural beauty. Once the flourishing capital of the Ahom dynasty that ruled Assam for over six centuries, Sivasagar stands today as a silent witness to a glorious past that has shaped the identity of the Assamese people. The town is adorned with majestic monuments, ancient temples, royal palaces and vast man-made water tanks that reflect the architectural brilliance and cultural richness of the Ahom era. These monuments are not merely remnants of a bygone era but living testimonies of a sophisticated civilization that once thrived in the heart of Assam. Most importantly, these monuments embody the everyday life of the people of Sivasagar and offer rich potential for immersive tourism experiences.

In recent years, the global tourism industry has witnessed a shift from conventional sightseeing to more participatory and experiential forms of travel. Tourists today are seeking not only monuments to admire but also cultural interactions, authentic local experiences and opportunities to engage with communities. In this context, Sivasagar, with its blend of historical heritage and living culture, offers immense potential to evolve as a holistic tourism destination.

Development of Local Enterprises around Historical Monuments

The growth of tea stalls, fast food shops and handicraft sellers around Rang Ghar and Kareng Ghar in Sivasagar is closely linked to the gradual rise in cultural tourism in the region. As these Ahom-era monuments began to attract more visitors, both from within Assam and outside, the surrounding areas organically transformed into spaces of informal economic activity. Local residents, especially from nearby villages, identified the growing footfall as an opportunity for income generation. Initially, these businesses began as small roadside stalls offering tea and light snacks to visitors. Over time, they diversified their offerings to include popular local delicacies and culturally significant souvenirs.

Thus, the rise of these small businesses near the monuments has led to a surge in micro-entrepreneurship. Many families in the nearby villages now depend on income from fast food stalls or handicraft selling. Youths who would otherwise migrate in search of jobs are finding employment opportunities close to home. Women, too, have stepped into the economic sphere by selling handcrafted goods, traditional weaves and home-cooked snacks. These initiatives not only provide a steady source of income but

also encourage financial independence and reduce rural unemployment. The success of these ventures has inspired others in the community to explore small-scale business models, leading to a diversified and sustainable local economy.

Economic Empowerment through Cultural Commodification

The commercialization of culture, when done respectfully, can lead to economic empowerment. The handicraft sellers near Rang Ghar and Kareng Ghar are primarily artisans who use locally available materials like bamboo, cane, clay and traditional weaving techniques to produce crafts that reflect Assamese heritage. Tourists often seek unique, handcrafted souvenirs and these artisans have tapped into that demand. By selling items like handmade jewellery, decorative items and miniature replicas of Ahom monuments, these sellers create a cultural economy that not only supports their families but also preserves traditional crafts. This cultural commodification has thus become a powerful tool for rural economic participation and empowerment.

The Multiplier Effect on the Local Economy

The informal businesses near the monuments create a ripple effect on the wider local economy. These small shops source ingredients, packaging materials, and raw supplies from local markets, thus boosting nearby vendors and wholesalers. Tourists who spend time at these shops often go on to explore other areas of Sivasagar, stay in local lodges, and dine in town restaurants, thereby benefiting a chain of service providers. Even transport services like e-rickshaws and auto-rickshaws gain from the increased tourist movement. Hence, the presence of these local businesses is not isolated—they are part of a broader tourism-driven economic network that sustains various sectors.

Integration with Heritage Conservation and Responsible Tourism

One of the most important aspects of this economic development is its potential for integration with responsible and sustainable tourism. When tourists experience local culture through food, crafts and conversation, their visit becomes more meaningful, and they are more likely to promote the site. This leads to increased awareness and respect for heritage, which can, in turn, encourage conservation efforts. If properly supported by local authorities, with provisions for designated vending spaces, hygiene standards and training in basic tourism etiquette, these micro-businesses can form an essential part of a heritage conservation strategy. Thus, the local economy not only benefits in the short term but also builds a long-term relationship between heritage preservation and livelihood generation.

Educational Tours as a catalyst for Economic Activity

Educational tours to historical sites like Rang Ghar and Kareng Ghar have become increasingly common among schools and colleges across Assam. These visits are not only academically enriching for students and teachers but also economically beneficial to the local community. The regular influx of student groups creates a demand for refreshments and souvenirs, which encourages the growth of small businesses in the area. These tours typically involve large

groups who require quick, affordable meals and local souvenirs, stimulating daily sales and giving a boost to vendors who depend on tourism for their livelihood.

Boost to Local Vendors and Informal Sector

Tea stalls and food vendors around these monuments experience a surge in customers during educational tours, as visiting students and teachers often stop to buy snacks and refreshments. Students and teachers often look for hygienic, tasty and affordable snacks during their tours. This growing demand has led many locals to set up food stalls offering traditional Assamese food items. As a result, many unemployed youths and women have found economic opportunities through food vending, helping them support their families. The steady income generated from these sales promotes financial stability and encourages further local investment.

Conclusion

The rise of tea shops, fast food stalls, and handicraft sellers near the historic monuments of Sivasagar is far more than a simple response to tourism—it is a remarkable example of grassroots, community-led economic transformation. These humble yet vibrant enterprises are weaving together threads of local culture, collective participation, and heritage tourism to build a self-sustaining economic fabric. In nurturing livelihoods, preserving tradition, and engaging visitors, they are not only strengthening the foundations of the local economy but also redefining heritage spaces as centers of inclusive growth and cultural exchange.

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