



Enhancing Transport Infrastructure of Meghalaya State Tourism Department through Local Tourist Taxis

¹Zaman Eddie Tongper, ²Marina Bethany Marwein

¹Assistant Professor, ²Professor

¹Department of Tourism and Travel Management,

¹Martin Luther Christian University, Meghalaya, India

Abstract : Tourism showcases a country's special and attractive geographical, cultural, and unique features. Transportation is an integral part and key element facilitating the development of tourism industry. Meghalaya state in northeastern part of India is a tourist paradise but the tourism department lacks adequate transport infrastructure. In order to help identify viable options, research was done during 2022-23 to elicit the expectations and experiences of the tourists and on the role played by commercial tourist taxis.

A representative random sample of 71 taxi drivers at Guwahati airport awaiting tourists was interviewed in depth regarding their abilities to meet the needs of tourists and the challenges they faced. The taxi drivers were committed to promoting tourism and provided a safe affordable and convenient transport to the tourists.

This paper briefly presents the findings and discusses whether an organized and trained fleet of taxis could serve as a sustainable option for enhancing the transportation infrastructure of the Meghalaya State Tourism Department.

Most drivers are experienced, have good local contacts, share sufficient knowledge of the prominent sites, aware of the Meghalaya Tourism App and could be a viable and sustainable option for the state tourism department to upgrade their transport infrastructure

I. INTRODUCTION

The spectacular revolution in air, sea, rail and road travels at affordable and efficient costs has made Tourism an attractive option for the public (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). Most countries which have some attractive features to showcase have encouraged tourists and made tourism a major programme of their governments (Page & Connell, 2014). Transportation is an integral part and key enabler of the tourism industry as it plays an important role in moving tourists from their place of residence to their destination (Virkar & Mallya, 2018). It is an essential link between all elements of tourism at destinations and good accessibility is instrumental for the overall competitiveness of destinations because it facilitates the internal movement of visitors between components of the tourist experience such as attractions, accommodation, and commercial services, which significantly influences visitor mobility and the connectivity of tourist experiences within destinations (Fajri & Kartika, 2016). Apart from good transport infrastructure, safe and secure accommodation and wholesome ethnic food are also important ingredients of successful tourism (Abdur & Hassan, 2022).

Meghalaya is blessed in many ways with places of historical interests, tourist attraction (Lyngdoh, 2022). A few decades ago, people in Meghalaya never thought of tourism as a means of sustaining livelihoods as people then were mostly dependent on government jobs or agriculture (Rynjah & Sailo, 2021). Tourism did not make an impact in Meghalaya as it does now. According to Nayak and Mishra (2013) one of the main challenges in the state prior to the pandemic is the failure to involve locals in providing transportation to tourists.

Tourism brochures and guides serve a critical role in promoting better understanding of the tourist sites and thus promote better tourism (García-Haro et al., 2021). Some of the taxis available to tourists maybe from outside Meghalaya, and when the drivers of such vehicles also serve as tour guides, it is unclear what kind of guidance and enlightenment they received, which is critical to promote tourism.

The transportation and driver are the first point of contact. The availability of suitable transportation is important for tourism development, and the introduction of dedicated vehicles can benefit stakeholders and tourism development. However, effective, and economical transport infrastructure needs much thought as mentioned in the recent Tourism Policy of the state government (Meghalaya Tourism Policy, 2023).

To answer to these questions, a research project was carried out as part of doctoral program with the main objective of ascertaining how tourists manage to obtain suitable transport without much help from the Meghalaya tourist department and the extent to which using local taxis can help promote tourism through affordable, safe, accessible, and acceptable transport. A corollary was to examine how the tourism department can collaborate with the taxi associations without losing its control and be responsible for the safety and success of tourist programmes. Incidentally it was hoped that the answers to these questions would enable suitable recommendations to tourism policies of the government. In this paper, the major findings from a representative random survey of taxi/cab drivers are briefly described in relation to promoting tourism with conclusions and suggestions for strengthening the transport infrastructure of the Meghalaya state tourism department.

II. NEED OF THE STUDY

The research project stemmed from a critical analysis of the tourism landscape in Meghalaya, recognizing various challenges hindering its full potential. Notably, the underutilization of local resources, particularly in providing transportation services to tourists, was identified as a significant barrier to tourism development. Coupled with this was the pressing issue of inadequate transportation options, which posed a considerable challenge to visitors and potentially deterred them from exploring the region. Moreover, the lack of clarity in guidance provided to tourists, especially by taxis operated by individuals from outside Meghalaya, raised concerns about the authenticity and quality of the tourism experience. Recognizing the potential for collaboration with local taxi associations, the study aimed to explore avenues for improving transportation services to enhance the overall tourism experience. Ultimately, the research sought to provide actionable insights and recommendations to inform the formulation of effective tourism policies by the government of Meghalaya, with the overarching goal of promoting sustainable tourism development and maximizing the benefits for local communities.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya state, whose capital is Shillong, a famous hill station. Baseline and background data on tourism statistics were extracted from the Meghalaya state government statistical reports and the tourist department records were used.

3.1 Study Design:

A cross-sectional random sample survey of taxi drivers was selected and were interviewed using a specially prepared interview schedule to ascertain the extent to which tourist taxi drivers fulfil their responsibilities of enabling the tourists to get a good view of the tourist attractions in the state, to identify their problems and challenges, to elicit their suggestions to the Meghalaya Tourist Department for further improvement of the transportation systems.

3.2 Study Location:

Most interviews were conducted at the Guwahati airport as the drivers await the passengers arriving by air or by road from various places and at the popular tourist destinations in and around East Khasi Hills District.

3.3 Study Duration:

The survey was done during September to December, 2022.

3.4 Sample Size:

71 tourist taxi drivers

3.5 Sample Size calculation:

Assuming that at least 60% would be quite aware of the popular sightseeing areas, taking type 1 error as 0.05, Power as 80% and precision as 20%, the minimum sample size for taxi drivers works out to around 60. Allowing for possible losses, it was aimed to select at least 70 respondents, explaining the research project, and seeking their cooperation and consent.

3.6 Sampling Procedure, Inclusion and Exclusion criteria for selecting Taxi drivers for the study:

Most tourists prefer to arrive at the Guwahati airport in Assam and travel by road to Meghalaya although there is a small airport in Shillong but with limited services. Thus, all the tourist taxis wait at the Guwahati airport, which provided a good sampling frame to select through systematic random sampling those taxis which served the tourist visiting Meghalaya. Strict confidentiality and anonymity of responses as well as extreme security were assured so that the responses were truly honest and valid.

3.7 Statistical analysis:

Data were entered into MS Excel sheets and analysed using SPSS software. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU) Research Ethics Committee, before conducting the survey.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Altogether 71 tourist taxi drivers were interviewed. Nearly 70% of the tourist taxi drivers have had at least five years of experience in the tourism transport. All tourist by air visiting Meghalaya were mainly picked up from Guwahati, Assam. Most tourist taxi drivers have fair and good knowledge on many of the popular tourist destinations in East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya.

Around 80% (95% Confidence Interval: 73% -91%) have good knowledge of specific sites ie Sohra and Shillong. Drivers with more experience have much better knowledge compared to less experienced and the difference is statistically significant ($p<0/05$). Those drivers with more experience have asserted they have more commitment to promote Meghalaya tourism, and the difference is statistically significant ($p<0.05$).

All tourist taxi drivers claim they play an important role in promoting tourism. Only about 65% (95% Confidence Interval :54% - 76%) of drivers agree on the applicability of common fare. Majority of the tourist taxi drivers say that it is the tourist taxi associations and the government that takes the decision in setting the travel fares. 60% (95% Confidence Interval: 50% - 72%) of the rate of tours is determined as per the destinations covered. About 80% of the tourist taxi drivers says that it takes in between 4 to 7 days to cover Shillong, Sohra, Mawsynram, Mawlynnong and Dawki. Almost 80% (95% Confidence Interval: 69% - 88%) of the tourist taxi drivers have tie-ups with the host communities at the major tourist destinations. All tourist taxi drivers prepare travel itineraries based on tourist's requirements, time available and costs.

The number of tourist taxi drivers who have attended trainings through the Meghalaya Tourist Driver Training initiated by the Directorate of Meghalaya Tourism, Government of Meghalaya is in Table 1

Table 4.1 Trainings attended through Meghalaya Tourist Driver Training Program (MTDTP)

Trainings attended	Number	Percentage
Yes	47	66.2
No	24	33.8
Total	71	100.0

Less than 70% (95% Confidence Interval :55% - 77%) of the tourist taxi drivers attended trainings through the Meghalaya Tourist Driver Training Program.

The type of trainings that the tourist taxi drivers would like to attend is shown in Table 2.

Table 4.2. Training(s) drivers would like to attend

Types of Trainings	Number	Percentage
First aid, safety and security	63	86.3
Tourism and hospitality services	71	100/0
Tour guide	49	69.0
Customer service skills	42	59.2
Social media	23	32.4
Car mechanical work	63	88.7
Environmental conservation and sustainability	33	46.5

Majority of the tourist taxi drivers are interested to attend trainings on tourism and hospitality services. It is interesting that some wish to have training in car mechanic. 60% (95% Confidence Interval: 52% - 75%) of the tourist taxi drivers suggested that the frequency of trainings should be once a year.

Almost all tourist taxi drivers are aware about the Meghalaya tourism app. However, only 80% (95% Confidence Interval: 73% - 91%) of the tourist taxi drivers have enrolled themselves in the Meghalaya tourism app. The opinion of a majority of tourist taxi drivers is that the Meghalaya Luxury Tourism Vehicle Scheme will benefit Meghalaya as a State. None of tourist taxi drivers have received incentives from the government. Majority of the tourist taxi drivers from Meghalaya view tourist taxi drivers from other states as partners.

Table 4.3. Challenges faced by tourist taxi drivers

Challenges	Number	Percentage
Heavy tax by the government	26	36.6
High insurance cost	27	38.0
Rejection of complaints sent to the government	50	70.4
Competition with tourist vehicles from other States	46	64.8
Some private vehicles are running as tourist taxis	71	100.0
Having impolite passengers	31	43.7
Language barrier when communicate with passengers from other places	25	35.2
Lack of respect from the general public	14	19.7
Lack of cooperation among tourist taxi drivers	3	4.2

One of the main challenges faced by the tourist taxi drivers is that there are many private vehicles that runs as tourist taxis and about 55% (95% Confidence Intervals: 43% - 67%) of the drivers are facing challenges such as rejection of complaints sent to the government and the attitude of impolite passengers among many others.

Table 4.4. Tie-ups between tourist taxi drivers and host communities at the major tourist destinations (n=71)

Tie-ups	Number	Percentage
Yes	56	78.9
No	15	21.1
Total	71	100.0

Almost 80% (95% Confidence Interval: 69% - 88%) of the tourist taxi drivers have tie-ups with the host communities at the major tourist destinations.

Various suggestions were made by the drivers to Tourism Department:

1. The government should arrange for proper embarkation point for tourists and check on private vehicles running as tourist vehicles.
2. The government should come up with policies similar to those e.g in Sikkim state in which tourist vehicles from other States cannot freely enter and government should take strict action against private vehicles who runs as tourist vehicles as this affect the business and livelihood of tourist taxi drivers.
3. There must be a tourist taxi association registered under the government. The police department should have thorough inspections and checking to see that private vehicles must not ply as commercial vehicles for tourists.
4. There should be proper parking space so that tourists can take a cab easily.
5. There should be good roads, proper signages and streetlights.
6. As tourist drivers, they want the tourists visiting Meghalaya to come through the Tourism Department and to take the transportation arranged by Meghalaya tourism vehicles.
7. Not to permit Assam private vehicles to transport tourists into Meghalaya and to use ISBT as a stopping point for Assam tourist vehicles.

Discussions

The availability of all tourist taxis at the Guwahati Airport were useful to obtain a valid sample of taxi drivers, and convenient to interview them leisurely. Thus, the findings should represent correctly the role played by the taxi drivers in helping the tourists make a successful tour of Meghalaya.

Pre-arranged and prior booking of taxis would be preferable and make the tourists feel more assured of smooth transport (Virkar & Mallya, 2018). At present, the tourists have to negotiate the charges based on their requirements which can be somewhat difficult to obtain an acceptable rate (Fajri & Kartika, 2016). However, in most cases, there is standard rate but may vary according to individual requirements. Ideally the state tourist department should assist in these arrangements as done in many countries (Nguyen, 2021). Tourists expect safety, affordability, convenience, and comfort in any transport arrangement made for them (Jangra et al, 2021) and the tourism department which makes these arrangements must guarantee the basic needs of tourists to promote tourism. In this connection, the availability of reliable, affordable, comfortable, and safe vehicles as well as knowledgeable, friendly, competent drivers (Ramasamy et al., 2021). The present research has shown that the taxis seem to satisfy most of the tourists' needs and the drivers seem committed, reliable, honest, and responsible. The data also reveals that majority of the tourist taxi drivers have had a good experience in the transportation sector, they are also willing to take part and are committed to improve tourism as they understand that they play an important role in promoting tourism (Fajri & Kartika, 2016). The findings show the taxi drivers were willing for training and committed to encourage tourism and thus help the tourism department. Thus, it is possible for the state tourism department to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for some suitable public-private partnerships which would benefit both parties, and enhance transport infrastructure (Virkar & Mallya, 2018).

The alternative for the state tourism department would be to own a fleet of their own vehicles, as suggested by some experts which might be better in some ways but would be too expensive and impractical to handle the growing numbers of tourists and their diverse needs, interests, budgets, and time. Thus, using the taxis might be more economical and convenient, with the state holding the responsibility for overseeing proper services and charging patterns. Of course, the tourism department can invest in a few sight-seeing buses with specific one-day or two days' excursions visiting the most popular sites. It is also possible for the state to own or hire their own vehicles to cater to the needs of VIPs or special guests (Nguyen, 2021).

Using pre-paid taxis or similar rental cars is becoming more popular in several public and private organizations (García-Haro et al., 2021). In fact, making use of taxis may be more efficient, time-saving and quite pragmatic in the light of growing needs of an organization and simultaneous revolution in rental cabs such as Uber and Ola (Aguilera-García et al., 2022 & Shah, 2020). One of the demands of the taxi drivers was not to allow outside state vehicles to serve as tourist taxis, but this may not be possible unless the government imposes heavy taxation on such vehicles, ensuring this does not adversely affect the public relations of tourists from some of the north eastern region. Many of the other demands can be easily taken care of, thus promoting more cordial relationships between the tourism department and the taxi drivers.

The study shows there is a need for proper training and orientation as per Table 2, not only in driving to notable sites, but taking care of the other needs of tourists such as food, accommodation, etc. The study shows that the taxis have come up to a reasonable standard and further committed to promoting tourism and the tourist department. There are several needs of the drivers, especially in terms of parking spaces, prohibition of outside the state drivers, and simple needs for rest areas, which the tourism department can easily take care of and budget appropriately (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2008).

The taxi drivers have made very useful and practical suggestions for the tourism department to implement. Such interactions can be made more formal and organized if the tourism department can develop proper cooperative ventures. The question of fares is an important area where the tourism department and the government can lay down basic premises to avoid exploitation or corruption, disparity of fare rates and these aspects were also pointed out by the drivers.

The outsourcing particularly of local taxis who have good tie ups with the resident population as seen in Table 4 is also an encouragement to promote entrepreneurship and better organized team of drivers and maintenance crews, who will ensure trouble-free sightseeing tours within the time and funds available (Lyngdoh, 2020.)

Conclusions

The tourist taxi drivers have been helpful, cooperative, and committed to promote tourism if properly trained and organized. Most drivers are experienced, have sufficient knowledge of the prominent sites, aware of the Meghalaya Tourism App and could be a viable and sustainable option for the state tourism department to upgrade their transport infrastructure.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the tourists, taxi drivers, for their cooperation and support in collecting necessary data for this research.

REFERENCES

- [1] Aguilera-García, Á., Gómez, J., Velázquez, G. Á., & Vassallo, J. M. (2022). Ridesourcing vs. traditional taxi services: Understanding users' choices and preferences in Spain. *Transportation Research Part A-policy and Practice*, 155, 161–178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2021.11.002>
- [2] Dinu, A.-M. (2018). The Importance of Transportation to Tourism Development. *Academic Journal of Economic Studies*, 4(4).
- [3] Fajri, K., & Kartika, T. (2016). The Service Quality of Taxi in Supporting Tourism Industry (Case Study in Bandung). *Atlantis Press*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/atf-16.2016.80>
- [4] García-Haro, M. Á., Martínez-Ruiz, M. P., Martínez-Cañas, R., & Ruiz-Palomino, P. (2021). Benefits of online sources of information in the tourism sector: The key role of motivation to Co-Create. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 16(6), 2051–2072. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer16060115>
- [5] Jangra, R., Kaushik, S., & Saini, S. S. (2021). An analysis of tourist's perceptions toward tourism development: Study of cold desert destination, India. *Geography and Sustainability*, 2(1), 48–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geosus.2021.02.004>
- [6] Khadaroo, J., & Seetanah, B. (2008). The role of transport infrastructure in international tourism development: A gravity model approach. *Tourism Management*, 29(5), 831–840. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.09.005>
- [7] Laloo, M. (2002). Meghalaya Land of Enchantment. Rilum Printing House.
- [8] Lyngdoh, B. F. (2022). An Exploration of Tourism Development of Meghalaya, India: What is the way forward? *Atna Journal of Tourism Studies*, 17(1), 143–166. <https://doi.org/10.12727/ajts.27.6>
- [9] Lyngdoh, S. M. (2020). Tourism and Rural Development. *Highland Post*. Retrieved from: <https://highlandpost.com/tourism-and-rural-development/>
- [10] Mathieson, A., & Wall, G. (1982). *Tourism: economic, physical and social impacts*. Retrieved from <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA0714084X>
- [11] Meghalaya Tourism Policy 2023. Available from: <https://www.meghalayatourism.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Meghalaya-Tourism-Policy-2023.pdf>
- [12] Murphy, P. (1985). *Tourism: a community approach*. Retrieved from <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB1229255X>
- [13] Nayak, P., & Mishra, S., K. (2013). Problems and Prospects of Promoting tourism in Meghalaya. *SSRN*. Retrieved from <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2236045>
- [14] Nguyen, Q. H. (2021). Impact of investment in tourism infrastructure development on attracting international visitors: A nonlinear panel ARDL approach using Vietnam's data. *Economies*, 9(3), 131. <https://doi.org/10.3390/economies9030131>
- [15] Page S J, Connell J. *Tourism: A modern synthesis*. Cengage Learning; 2014.
- [16] Rab, F. A., & Hassan, A. (2022). Tourism, Health Promoting Food Domain and Technology Applications: Individual's Genes Reservoir, Environmental Change and Food in Natural Health Context. *In Handbook of Technology Application in Tourism in Asia* (pp. 1159–1200). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2210-6_53
- [17] Ramasamy, A., Muduli, K., Mohamed, A., Biswal, J. N., & Pumwa, J. (2021). Understanding customer priorities for selection of call taxi service provider. *Journal of Operations and Strategic Planning*, 4(1), 52–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516600x21997201>
- [18] Rynjah, M. R., & Sailo, G. L. (2021). Ecotourism and Rural livelihood opportunities in East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya. *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 68–72. <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra6958>
- [19] Shah, T. (2020). Service quality dimensions of ride-sourcing services in Indian context. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 28(1), 249–266. <https://doi.org/10.1108/bij-03-2020-0106>
- [20] Virkar, A. R & Mallya, P. D. (2018). A Conceptual Paper on the Dimensions of the Road Transport System that Influence Tourist Satisfaction. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 8(3), 296–303.