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Brand Awareness - A Study of Assam Tourism

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A good reputation can enhance the competitiveness of a place. As Assam become popular in global world with its reputation and natural beauty, tourism will automatically come and create brand awareness. The study investigates about the awareness of visitors in Assam. Brand awareness is the panorama that visitors are known about the existence and accessibility of the place. Local people are the important stakeholders of the destination brand. Literature research indicated that destination should be secure, pleasant and comforting with quality place to stay for the visitors to attract them to establish and create a brand about that destination. The study is based on exploratory research with structured questionnaire and data was collected from the travelers/ visitors by using the questionnaires. Results of the survey revealed that visitors are aware about Assam because of its Natural scenic Beauty. Research also indicated that in Assam transportation facility is not good, awareness about tourist spot among the visitors and weak communication are the key concern. Research highlighted some new insights about the tourism attractions of Assam amongst people such as wild life, tea garden. Native people of Assam are friendly and fluent in English language. The research concludes that majority of the visitors are willing to recommend the tourist places of Assam to their relatives, friends and colleagues.

Key Words : Assam, Brand, Destination Brand, Brand Awareness, Tourism

Introduction

Travel and tourism has become a major arena in global trade and according to the World Tourism Organization it is one of the fastest growing industries. Tourism has become one of the key sources of revenue generation for every country in the world. Cities and countries are trying to project their places as favorite brand in front of the tourists. To project any location in front of tourists, governments and tourism departments of any particular place are promoting them as prominent brand. Countries are promoting them to create brand awareness among the rest of the people. Brand awareness provides a way of creating a unique identity through relationship building. In general, people buy brands because they needs them and enjoy them. In the context of tourism destination, it makes sense that destination should be managed as brand identity and perceived as a competitive marketplace.

From the ancient times, Assam has been the meeting point of many communities and cultures from early 16th century. People from different part of the Asia have migrated to Assam and settled due to its scenic beauty, natural heritage and rich cultures. Today, Assam is considered as one of the unique cultural place in India. It creates romantic atmosphere in all the seasons. The greater Assam is majorly divided into Upper Assam, Lower Assam and Barak Valley. It is adverse that due to some reasons, Assam and the other states of Northeast has remained ignored and diffident from the progress point of view. The main aim of the study is to know the thought of visitors about Assam. Destination branding is in very nascent stage in Assam. Tourism development of Assam could attract national and international tourists.

Brand awareness includes the awareness about the component of brand that contains during his whole life time. The components are Brand image, brand culture, brand essence, brand personality and brand character.

Location branding is one of the tough task because it includes the verbal and visual elements about the location. District Marketing Organization plays major role to increase the awareness about tourism among visitors by promoting the details about the location. District Marketing Organizations (DMOs) support their stakeholders to provide consistent information to visitors including beauty, peace, historical monuments, food etc because these are the part of the destination brand. In a simple term, branding is one of the key area to create awareness about a particular place among the visitors.

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Objectives

The key objective of the study is to identify the brand awareness of Assam among the visitors / tourists. The study aims to identify several issues such as Good Attributes of tourist destination, Information resource for visitors, Top Reasons for not traveling Assam, Ready to spend for Assam tour and Recommendation by tourist for Assam trip are the major ones.

Literature review

Brand has become one of the important aspects in contemporary times in every part of the life. People know only brands such as Brand Rahul Gandhi, Aamir Khan or Places like Kerela. Brand has occupied major part of our day to day life. Every where only brands are visible. Destination branding is relatively a new concept in brand and there is dearth of research. Place brands have some unique characteristics and that are certainly different from products or services.

Brand awareness is the possibility that visitors are known about the existence and accessibility of the product. It is the level to which visitors exactly connect the brand with the unambiguous product. Brand awareness is improved in certain cases due to the name of the product because it is easy to pronounce or spell and distinctive in nature. Few examples of simple brand names are Coca Cola as Coke, Tata, Dell and destination brand namely Kerela. There are three types of brand awareness such as top of mind awareness, spontaneous awareness and aided awareness. Top of mind or immediate brand recall is the process that immediately comes into the mind of respondent. Spontaneous awareness includes the second, third and so on brands that comes into the minds of respondent. Aided awareness is the process where respondent get some aid in the form of picture, word, audio, video to recall the brand.

Local people play a vital role in destination brand building and creating awareness about a particular place among the tourist. Freire (2009) have identified in his research that local people play a key role in place branding or awareness creating because local are going to interact with the visitors. In addition knowledge of English language and business dealings of local people with visitors plays a role on brand building and awareness creating. So, it can be said the image of a particular place is depend on the local people of the place.

Baloglu and McClearly (1999) indicated that in the tourism arena destination image has been defined as being a set of values, feelings, and imitation that people have of a place or destination. Kotler & Gertner (2002) indicated that nation image has an impact on the product and services of that place and the image can augment the status of a location by positive or negative way. Gnoth (2002) found that the progress of a place branding creates the benefit for the products and services of that particular destination and attracts diversified tourists and create the image as well as the awareness about that location among the visitors. Organizing an event in a place helps to create a better image for the host destination and it creates a co- brand for both the event and place. Co-branding has positive and negative impact because failure of the event will decrease the image of host place (Xing and Chalip, 2006). Carpenter et al. (1994) in their study found that irrelevant attributes can be used to differentiate brands and even create value but its impact is dependent on competition. Destinations are products with a heavy dependency on services which act as a destination differentiator, increasing brand value (McDougall et al., 2000).

Konecnik and Go (2008) identified in their study about the importance of the brand uniqueness concept on place branding. Olins (2002) also suggested that, sometimes places alter their names and places have always been engaged in brand building and awareness creating to become more visible among people. Unique identity creation communicate a message to the visitors and it links to the destination with visitors. Wilkins et al. (2008) suggested that the destination should be secure, pleasant and comforting with quality place to stay are the major feature to establish and create a brand about the destination.

The place product is an exclusive combination of buildings, facilities and venues. McIntosh and Goeldner (1990); Inskeep(1991); Kim(1998) found that a tourist place is a composite product of tourism industry and it consists of natural resources, infrastructure, superstructure, services, unique local features, cultural attributes among others. It ensures that unique cultural heritage and local peoples are the major part of tourism destination and without them a tourist place cannot influence

the brand among the visitors. Ooi (2004) indicated that the location branding promotes the brand message of that particular place and creates awareness among rest of the visitors. Destination branding only focuses on tourism.

Janonis et al. (2007) have indicated that brand identity is a concept which includes brand uniqueness, purpose, values and individuality. Brand identity provides a prospect for the company to attain competitive advantage on the basis of the exclusive brand identity. The brand identity builds up on the inner values of the brand.

Krishnan and Nafees (2010) have highlighted in their study about the brand awareness of seven sisters of India and its unexplored beauty. They indicated various approach about improving the tourism of north-eastern state based on the brand identity elements such as brand culture, brand character, brand personality, brand name, brand logos, brand slogan, brand image, brand architecture, brand promise, brand evaluation, brand internalization and brand experience.

Hem and Iversen (2004) identified a framework to develop destination logos to create the destination awareness among visitors and will increase the image of the destination. Also suggested that three partners involved in developing the destination logos are the logo owner, the logo developer and the logo recipients.

Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) suggested that destination branding of a country requires the effective branding strategy to position the country in the mind of visitors and failures would lead to decrease the image of that country. Caldwell and Freire (2004) have suggested that country and other destinations should be branded differently because countries are functionally diverse whereas regions and cities, being smaller in scale and therefore the branding strategies for all three types of tourist destinations should be different.

Research Method

The collection of data was carried out by using self-administered questionnaire. The questions were presented in mostly close-ended style with self-structured questions. Data were collected from the travelers/ visitors by using the questionnaires. The survey was conducted in Guwahati in the tourist spots of Kamakhya, Basistha, Umananda, Guwahati Zoo, Houseboat at Barhmaputra and in Jorhat data were collected from Majuli, Jorhat city and Kaziranga Sanctuary (nearby Jorhat) during the months of January to March 2012. These places of Assam were chosen because of their accessibility with the rest of the country by land and air. The study applies a convenience sampling technique as a sampling method. 250 questionnaires were printed and distributed to visitors. Questionnaires filled by tourist were 230 questionnaires in number and out of which 215 were completely filled. Out of the total 215 completed filled questionnaires, 163 (i.e. 76.82%) was filled in Guwahati and 52 (i.e. 24.18%) was filled in Jorhat areas.

In the study secondary data is also consulted. Particularly journals like Annals of Tourism Research, Journal of Services Marketing, Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism, Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Place Management and Development as well as newspapers such as Brand Equity of Economic Times and many websites in Internet namely Assam Tourism Department and Kerala Tourism have been thoroughly check with.

The analysis is done in simple manner without using any jargons. Tables have been used to present survey results so that results could be easily understood. Further, to identify the visitors spending pattern median has been calculated as a statistical technique and it is shown in Table 7.

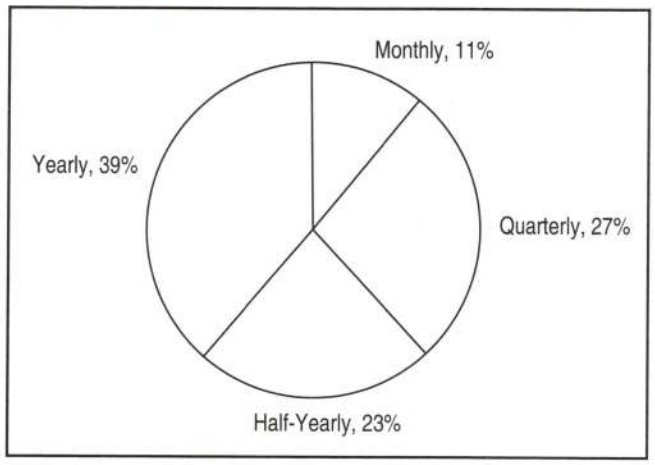
Findings of the Study

Greater part of the sample shows that the frequent travelers are on rise for Assam and 70% of respondents were frequent travelers to Assam. It is clear from the Figure 1, 39% of the respondents are yearly visitors for the Assam whereas monthly visitors are in small numbers nearly 11% to Assam. The major reason they have indicated is the violence situation in Assam. It is true that though the current situation is stable but people have a perception from the past that situation may deteriorate at any point of time.

Good Attributes of tourist destination

The responses of the survey have indicated few parameters as most important attributes of good tourist destination (refer to Table 1). 67% respondents have reported that they know Assam as a natural scenic traveler destination.

Figure 1: Frequency of travel



N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Table 1: Attributes of Tourist Destination

Unexplored scenic beauty	Cultural attractions
People friendliness	Historical places
Safety for visitors	Hospitality of the native people
Cultural heritage of the place	Information about the places
Local festivals	Entertainment available at the location

N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Unexplored scenic beauty is the beauty that is not explored by the visitors and unknown to majority of the people. Scenic is the word that defines about natures with mountains, rivers and wildlife. Kaziranga National Park, Majuli Island and the famous male river Bhramaputra is few names of the regions beauty.

People friendliness: It indicates about the people who become friendly with visitors and other unknown people in short period of time.

Safety for visitors: Travelers safety is one of the important parts in tourism and it represents the place in front of the visitors that how much they are willing to visit the area.

Cultural heritage of the place: Cultural heritage includes the history of cultural property and intangible attributes of a group or society that people's inherited from their past generations. Cultural heritage includes three main things such natural heritage, tangible and intangible culture. Natural heritage includes biodiversity and cultural landscapes. Tangible culture includes buildings, monuments, landscapes, books and intangible culture are folklore, traditions, language.

Local festivals: It includes the cultural festivals that happen on that particular area. In the case of Assam, main local festivals are Bihu, Puja and so on.

Cultural attractions: Assam is rich in terms of cultural and ethnic values. Bihu and other folk dances are part of tourist attractions. Bihu is the festival that is celebrated by the Assamese across the world. Many of the travelers or tourist knows Assam is the place of Bihu dance.

Historical places: Assam is rich in terms of historical places. Some of the historical places are situated is in Guwahati and Sivasagar. Guwahati has many places that attract visitors such as Kamakhya, Umananda, Navagraha, Sukreswar, Basistha, Lankeshwar, Doul Govinda, Dirgheshwari, Ugro Tara, Rudreswar and so on. Similarly, few historical places of Sivasagar are Kareng Ghar, Shivadol, Vishnudol, Devidol, Gaurisagar, Rudrasagar, Namdang which attract many tourists to these places. Visitors watch the ancient monument built by the kings of Assam.

Hospitality of the native people: Hospitality is the part of welcoming the tourist or visitors in your native place and entertaining them with foods or some other practice. The native people of Assam are open to welcome tourist and friendly to the visitors.

Information about the place: Information is the major source to decide the travelling activity by a visitor. Today, information for any place or destination is available in any part of globe due to internet, tourism offices and travel agencies.

Entertainment available at the location: Entertainment is another major activity for visitors to travel any particular destination because tourist major aim is to explore scenic beauty, leisure and fun. Entertainment play's the major role to attract tourist to a destination.

Information resource for visitors

Amazingly, more than half of the respondents i.e. 65% of the respondent have heard of Assam as tourist place. Majority of the people have got their information about Assam i.e. 74% of the respondent. Further, Friends from Assam, National Newspapers, Internet/web, Magazines, Travel Guide, Cinema and Travel agency are the source of information for the visitors of Assam (refer to Table 2). The data in the table 2 is based on multiple answered questions, so the total response percentage is more than 100 percentages.

Lack of knowledge about Assam

From the Table 3, it is clear that more than the 9% respondents have spontaneous awareness about the places of Upper Assam followed by more than 7% respondents have the spontaneous awareness about the places of lower Assam. Majority of the respondents needs aid/ help during the interaction to recall about the tourist places of Assam. Further, more than 40% of the respondents belong to the aided awareness category for Upper Assam.

Awareness about Assam

Assam visit for travelers based on some positive parameters. The research has indicated few positive awarness about the visit to Assam and are majorly based on Natural scenic beauty of Assam, New beaty in the country and unique culture of Assam (refer to Table 4).

Interaction with native of Assam

The research has identified that more than 60% of the respondent have met native people of Assam i.e. 64% of the respondents out of 215 respondents. It sums up that these respondents have interacted with the native people of Assam at some point of time in their life.

Research has revealed that majority of the respondents had an interaction with the native people of Assam and respondents also revealed that people from Assam are fashionable, friendly, loveable and simple. Further, people of Assam are good in speaking Hindi as well as fluent in English.

Visit of Assam in Future Time

More than 80% of the respondent has indicated that they want to visit Assam. It is clear from the below Table 5 that 51% of the respondent will definitely visit the Assam and 4% respondent are not sure about their visit to Assam.

Interesting tourism offerings of Assam

Tourism attractions are the key product or offerings of Assam. Major tourism attractions of Assam are wildlife, Tea Garden as per the response given by the respondent. The low attractions for Assam visitors are Cultural attractions, Historical monument, Heritage of Assam (refer to Table 6).

Ready to spend for Assam tour

Money is one of the major criteria for the visitors for travel. Visitors need huge amount of money to travel. Near about half of the respondents i.e. 40% are ready to spend between INR 25,000 49,999 for the trip of Assam followed by 20% are ready to spend less than INR 10000 (refer to Figure 2).

Median Calculation to find out the spending pattern

In order to find out the median, the figure 2 is converted into class boundary. Table 7 indicates that the calculated median is INR 27470.43. This signifies that 50% of the respondents want to spend more than the INR 27470.43 during their visit.

Recommendation by tourist for Assam trip

Recommendation comes to the picture when visitors become too happy or satisfied after visiting a particular location. Satisfaction comes when there a match bewteen expectation and return of the result. Satisfied visitors spread the positive word of mouth to the relatives, friends and colleagues once they return to their native place.

Out of 215 respondents, 63% of the respondents have agreed to recommend Assam to their relatives, friends and colleagues to visit Assam. However, only 3% respondents said that they don't want to recommend the place to others (refer to Figure 3) indicating the safety and security as concern.

Table 2: Tourist Information Source of Assam

Source of Information for Tourist	Responses in Percentages (%)
General Knowledge	85
Friends from Assam	39
National Newspapers	34
Internet / web	28
Magazines	18
Travel Guide	15
Cinema 6	
Travel Agency	2

N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Table 3: Awareness about Assam

Name of the places of Assam	Spontaneous aware Percentage	Aided awareness Percentage
Lower Assam	7.56	27.17
Upper Assam	9.35	41.36
Barak Valley	4.46	6.16

N = 215 *(Source: **Primary Data**)*

Lower Assam includes places of Assam such as Barpeta, Kamrup and Upper Assam includes places such as Sivasagar, Jorhat, Dergaon, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia. Barak Valley includes only Silchar.

Table 4 : Awareness of Assam among tourists

Positive Awareness	Negative Awareness
Natural scenic Beauty of Assam	Tourist places of Assam is not known to many Indians
New Beauty in the country	Low quality and unaccessible transport facility
Unique Culture of Assam	Terrorism activity happened at Assam
Excellence Experience	

N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Table 5: Responses on Visit of Assam

Visitors response Assam	Responses in percentage
Definitely Visit	51
Visit	30
May Visit	15
Not Sure	4

N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Table 6: Tourism offerings of Assam

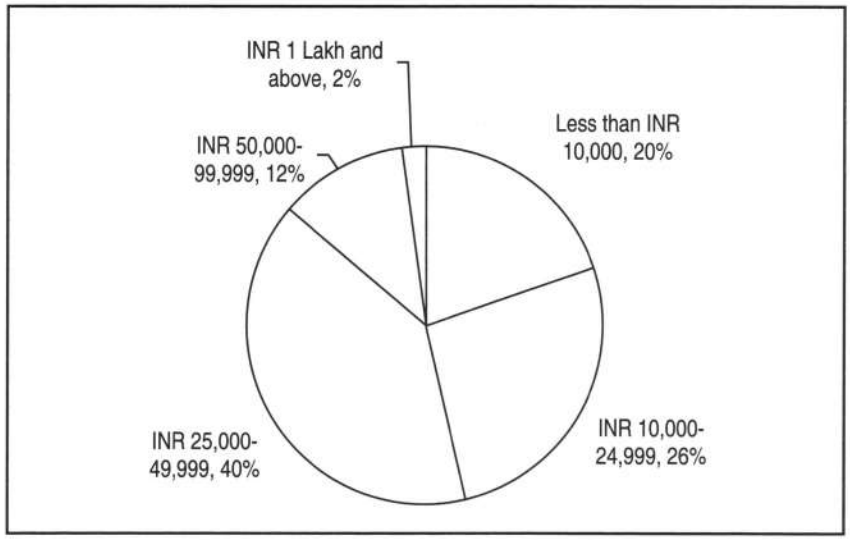
Tourism Attractions	Tourism factors of Assam
Key Attractions	Wild Life
	Tea Garden
Low Attractions	Cultural attractions
	Historical monument
	Heritage of Assam

N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Table 7: Median calculation for spending pattern

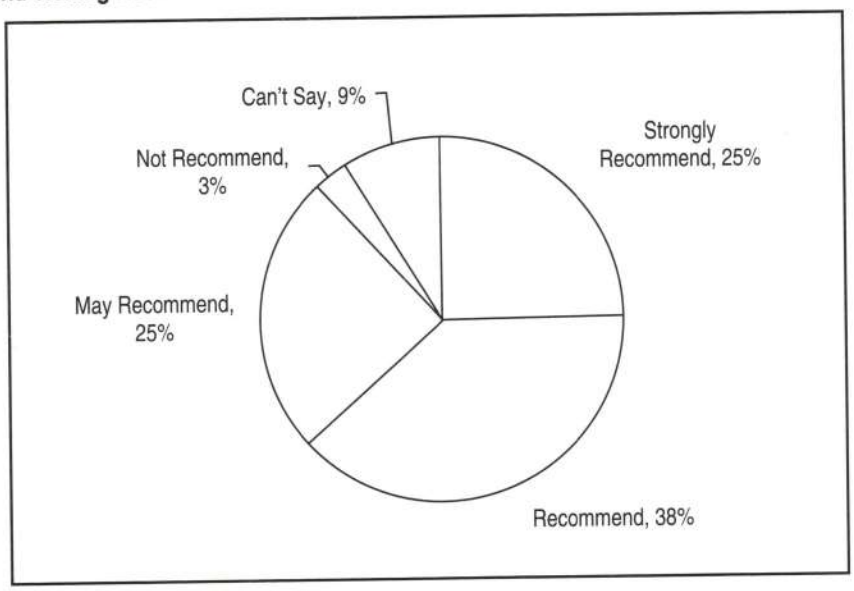
Ready to spend (data taken from figure 2)	Converted into class boundary	Frequency	Cumulative Frequency
Less than 10,000	Less than 10,000.5	43	43
10,000 – 24,999	9999.5 – 24,999.5	56	99
25,000 – 49,999	24,999.5 – 49,999.5	86	185
50,000 – 99,999	49,999.5 – 99,999.5	26	211
100,000 and above	Greater than 100,000.5	4	215
		(N=215)	
Median: 27,470.43			

Figure 2: Ready to spend on Assam trip



N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Figure 3: Recommend visiting Assam



N=215 ***(Source: Primary Data)***

Conclusion

Brand awareness about a tourist place helps visitors to identify the suitable and secure information for the vacation or leisure purpose. Tourist wants their leisure time should be safe, friendly and enjoyable. Research indicated that the number of visitors is on rise for Assam. People are aware about Assam because it's known for its Natural scenic Beauty of Assam, New Beauty in the country and Unique Culture of Assam.

In the literature it has been indicated that local people plays a vital role in destination brand building. A destination should be secure, pleasant and comforting with quality place to stay for the visitors. It has been clear from the study that General Knowledge, Friends from Assam, National Newspapers and Internet / web are the major source of information about the tourism places of Assam. Research highlights some new insights about the tourism attractions of Assam among visitors such as wild life; tea gardens as well as native people of Assam are friendly and fluent in English language.

Majority of the visitors have indicated that visiting cost per trip is around INR 25, 000 49,999 for Assam depending on the tourist places. In addition, visitors are willing to recommend the tourist places of Assam to their relatives, friends and colleagues which are a good sign for the state.

Limitation and Scope for Future Research

A limitation of this study is that data collection was conducted during the month of January - March. Visitors' characteristics and images about Assam as a travel destination may vary by season. For example, a traveler who visits Assam during the traditional festivals vacation may have a different image and perception towards Assam as a travel destination in comparison to someone who travels there in Summer or winter time.

Future research should investigate additional attributes of destination brand that may influence overall image and tourist behaviours.

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Teaching Notes

Question 1: Can branding strategy is same for every destination?

Answer: Destination branding of a country requires the effective branding strategy to position the country in the mind of visitors and failures would lead to decrease the image of that country. Country and other destinations should be branded differently because countries are functionally diverse whereas regions and cities, being smaller in scale and therefore the branding strategies for all three types of tourist destinations should be different.

Question 2: Who plays the key role in place branding?

Answer: Local people play a vital role in destination brand building and creating awareness about a particular place among the tourist. In place branding or awareness creating local are going to interact with the visitors. In addition knowledge of English language and business dealings of local people with visitors plays a role on brand building and awareness creating. Hence, it can be said the image of a particular place is depend on the local people of the place.

Question 3: What are the prominent attributes people considered while traveling to a particular destination?

Answer: A destination should be secure, pleasant and comforting with quality place to stay for the visitors. Further the destination should have scenic beauty, unique culture, transportation availability, safety, cultural heritage and historical places.

Question 4: How do visitors perceive Assam?

Answer: People from different part of the Asia have migrated to Assam and settled due to its scenic beauty, natural heritage and rich cultures. Nowadays, Assam is considered as one of the unique cultural place in India. It creates romantic atmosphere in all the seasons.

Question 5: What are the different reasons that visitors want to travel to Assam?

Answer: List of different reasons that visitors want to travel to Assam are mentioned below:

- Unexplored scenic beauty of natures with mountains, rivers and wildlife. Kaziranga National Park, Majuli Island and the famous male river Bhramaputra is few names of the regions beauty.
- Hospitality of the native people. The native people of Assam are open to welcome tourist and friendly to the visitors.
- Local people become friendly with visitors in short period of time.
- Rich cultural heritage of the place includes monuments, landscapes, books and intangible culture are folklore, traditions, language. Some of the historical places are situated is in Guwahati and Sivasagar. Guwahati has many places that attract visitors such as Kamakhya, Umananda, Navagraha, Sukreswar, Basistha, Lankeshwar, Doul Govinda, Dirgheshwari, Ugro Tara, Rudreswar and so on. Similarly, few historical places of Sivasagar are Kareng Ghar, Shivadol, Vishnudol, Devidol, Gaurisagar, Rudrasagar, Namdang which attract many tourists to these places. Visitors watch the ancient monument built by the kings of Assam.
- Cultural festivals such as Bihu, and other folk dances are part of tourist attractions. Bihu is the festival that is celebrated by the Assamese across the world. Many of the travelers or tourist knows Assam is the place of Bihu dance.