

Branding of Tourist Destination: A Case Study of Manipur in India

S. L. S. Akoijam* (*sunil.mba.amity@gmail.com*)
North-Eastern Hill University, India

C. I. Meitei (*ibmeitei@yahoo.com*)
Manipur University, India

Abstract

Manipur is a state situated in the Eastern-most corner of Northeast India. The state shares borders with other Northeastern states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam and the neighbouring country of Myanmar. Manipur has conducive Agro-Climatic Conditions for fruits and vegetables. It has also a good connectivity and link with South East Asian countries. It has supportive vegetation for various medicinal and aromatic plants. It also has a good transport infrastructure and effective air connectivity with major cities of the country including Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Bangalore etc. Manipur has various unique and beautiful tourist destinations which attract a large number of tourists not only from within the country but also from abroad. The state is surrounded by green verdant hills with salubrious weather. It offers a variety of attractions for tourists including lakes, parks, historical places, gardens, waterfalls, mountains etc. This paper is an attempt to identify the branding components of Manipur as a differentiated tourist destination. It has adopted the destination branding model adapted from (from Saarinen 1997; Ooi 2001; Iliachenko 2005). The paper is exploratory in nature. In order to achieve the objectives, the cases of various attractive tourist destinations in Manipur have been taken into account. Moreover the SWOT analysis has also been used for better analysis. The findings of the study reveals that branding is an important element in identifying and differentiating tourist destinations in order to attract a large number of tourists from all over the globe. It also plays an important role in promoting the destination in a unique way.

Keywords: Branding, Destinations, Manipur, Promotion & Tourist.

INTRODUCTION

India is fast emerging as an important tourism destination in the world. The “Incredible India” campaign which showcases the best that India has to offer to the tourists has now attracted worldwide attention. The Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, has noted that the number of foreign tourist arrivals in India in 2009 was 5.11million at an annual growth rate of 3.3%. The number of domestic tourist visits to all States/UTs was 650 million at an annual growth rate of 15.5%. The foreign exchange earnings from tourism were US\$ 1851.1 billion at an annual growth rate of 8.3% contributing a significant 5.9% to the GDP of the country and creating 42 million jobs. By 2017, the industry is expected to contribute to rise to US\$ 3121.7 billion in absolute terms but percentage wise it will decrease to 3.4% as per Planning Commission. Andhra Pradesh topped domestic tourist visits with 24.2% and Tamil Nadu, in foreign tourist visits with 17.3%. Manipur recorded an insignificant data of 0.9% domestic and 0.3% foreign tourist visits. A concerted effort and actionable measures are therefore needed to take a piece of this tourism pie. Other than the tourism industry itself, the global spread of tourism has produced significant economic and employment benefits in many related and interlinked sectors too from construction to agriculture or telecommunications. Tourism as an industry is expected to grow by 4.3% per annum between 2008-17 according to the Planning Commission. This multiplier effects of tourism need to be tapped maximally to enrich the economy and society of the land.

Manipur, with her comfortable climate, mystique cultural heritage and sublime natural beauty, located strategically in a hitherto considered disadvantageous geographical area, promises to be a huge potential for the growth of tourism. The majesty of the Loktak Lake, the strategic location of Moreh, the uniqueness of the Keibul Lamjao floating National Park & the Sangai Deer, the beauty of the Siroy & Dzukou Lilies, along with the naturally formed limestone caves, pristine green hills and valleys, meandering rivers, cascading rapids, exotic flora & fauna compounded by a rich arts and culture, folklore, myths and legends, indigenous games and artistic handloom & handicrafts, makes Manipur a little paradise on earth and a fertile ground for a tourist to explore. The Asian Development Bank has identified the region as a Key Area due to its unrealized potential as an ecotourism product“. The mystery of the Indian Classical Dance form Ras Leela with their intricate costume design, the wonder of the Pung Cholom (Drum Dance), the vibrant tribal dances are some of the precious treasures any

tourist will find appealing. The exotic cuisines, the unique tribal cultures and the soothing native music can be an enchanting discovery for various tourists visiting the State. The birthplace of modern Polo, the indigenous games of Yubi Lakpi, Kang Sanaba, Arambai, Thang-Ta and Mukna will prove to be a thrilling experience for any enthusiastic tourist. The tourism industry should also encourage the growth of local handloom and handicrafts cottage industry. Weaving is a time-honoured occupation in the land and has been fine-tuned to an art form with its intricate designs most popularly the Wangkhei Phee and Haophee. Trade centres should be established and encouraged to showcase these products and attract the visiting tourists.

Healthcare is one aspect where Manipur is already well ahead in the region and if properly nurtured, can become a principal patient-tourist attraction from the neighbouring States and Nations. The State has a high percentage of qualified health specialists who can cater to different ailments both in terms of allopathic and ayurvedic medicines. Every new bed creates employment for 5 personnel directly and about 25 personnel indirectly. There is a huge requirement for health care workforce in India. Healthcare is expected to create 70 million to 80 million jobs in the next 10 yrs, adding 2 to 3 % p.a. to the Nation's GDP. In 2006, more than 2 million medical tourists availed medical services in South-east Asia from all corners of the world. Because of the lack of adequate medical facilities in their country, most Myanmar patients also avail of medical treatment in Bangkok and Singapore. Comparatively, treatment in India is much cheaper than that in Thailand without compromising on the quality and technology of patient care, and all efforts should be concentrated on attracting the Myanmar patients to Manipur where some of the best treatments in the world are affordably available in our health care centres. Focus should also be given to the neighboring States of Mizoram and Nagaland.

With regard to tourism prospects, the abolishment of the Inner Line Permit System from the State can be exploited to accelerate the growth of domestic tourism. Similarly, the relaxation and exclusion of Manipur from the Protected Area Regime since January 2011 can be a major boost to inflow of foreign high-end tourists to the State. However, further steps are required to modify the relaxation so that citizens of Myanmar, who are our primary foreign target, can visit the State beyond the mandatory 16 Kms to enable them to fully explore freely the land and also to avail medical facilities. This will also boost the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade to a

great extent. Furthermore, Manipur, which was the great and last battlefield in World War II, can receive a big impetus in the tourism sector from many foreign tourists especially from Japan and the Commonwealth countries whose relatives, ancestors and countrymen lost their lives in the battlefield here.

Manipur and its tourism policies become all the more important in view of India's Look East Policy and the Trans-Asian Highways and Railways. The Government is keen to take advantage of these developments and therefore seeks to create a unique brand to market Manipur Tourism as the "Gateway to South-East Asia" in conformity with its modernity, relevance, competitiveness, strategic location and commercial aspects. It is the belief of the Government that once the appropriate infrastructure and services are suitably placed, Manipur is destined to become a rich commercial hub and a tourist hotspot in South-East Asia akin to Bangkok.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Most tourism activities take place at a particular destination, therefore the destination itself forms a pillar of any modelling that is done for the tourism system (Pike 2004). Destination can be seen as an area that includes all services and goods a tourist consumes during his or her stay (Terzibasoglu 2004; Wito 2007). This destination appeal shape should transfer to a unique and competitive destination brand which expresses the reality of the destination and conveys the tourist perspective. The destination marketing organizations (dmo's) and the enterprises are involved in the building and marketing of destination tourist services (Grängsjö 2003). This is why a tourist destination concept should focus on both customers and producers. The marketing success of a destination is dependent not only on the called push factors (market demand forces) but also on the pull factors (supply-side factors), that have a major impact on the branding success of a particular destination.

Destination branding is defined as: selecting a consistent element mix to identify and distinguish it through positive image building (Cai Liping 2002), i.e. how consumers perceive the destination in their minds. Destination branding conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience

(Goeldner, Ritchie, and Mac- Intosh 2000; Kaplanidou and Vogt 2003). The desire to become a recognizable destination presents a marketing challenge (Kotler, Bowen, and Makens 2006). For marketers, branding is perhaps the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers confronted by tourists who are increasingly seeking lifestyle fulfilment and experience rather than recognizing differentiation in the more tangible elements of the destination product, such as accommodation and attractions (Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride 2004). A successful destination brand needs to convey the expectations, or promise, of a memorable travel experience that is distinctively associated with that destination (Ritchie and Crouch 2003; Blain, Levy, and Ritchie 2005; Knapp and Sherwin 2005).

Benefits of Branding

According to Kotler, brands' benefits, are two-fold; they serve as a 'major tool to create product/services differentiation,' and they represent a promise of value from a consumer's viewpoint (Kotler and Gartner 2002).

Clarke (2000) has identified six benefits of branding related to tourism destination products:

1. As tourism is typically high involvement, branding helps to reduce the choice,
2. Branding helps in reducing the impact of intangibility,
3. Branding conveys consistency across multiple outlets and through time,
4. Branding can reduce the risk factor attached to decision making about holidays.
5. Branding facilitates precise segmentation,
6. Branding helps to provide a focus for the integration of producer effort, helping people to work towards the same outcome.

Benefits of branding for the community as a whole:

- Creates a unifying focus to aid all public, private, and non-profit sector organizations that rely on the image of the place and its attractiveness.
- Brings increased respect, recognition, loyalty, and celebrity.
- Corrects out of date, inaccurate or unbalanced perceptions.
- Improves stakeholder income, profit margins, and increases lodging tax revenues. Increases the ability to attract, recruit, and retain talented people.

- Enhances civic pride and advocacy.
- Expands the size of the 'pie' for stakeholders to get a larger share, rather than having to rely on pricing to steal their share (www.destinationbranding.com).

Brand Image

A country's image results from its geography, history, proclamations, art and music, famous citizens, and other features. The entertainment industry and the media play a particularly important role in shaping people's perceptions of places, especially those viewed negatively (Simonin 2008). This image can be seen as the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about places. Images represent a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with a place, they are a product of the mind trying to process and pick out essential information from huge amounts of data about a place (Kotler, Heider, and Rein 1993). The image is a reflection, sometimes distorted, of its fundamental being, a measure of its health, and a mirror to its soul. It speaks to the way a country exists in people's minds and hearts as well as to the position it occupies in relations to other countries (Simonin 2008).

Destination image has a key role for tourism marketers. Several researchers (e. g. Mayo and Jarvis 1981; Woodside and Lysonski 1989) have illustrated that destination image and tourists' purchase decisions are positively correlated; this is an important issue in an individual's travel purchase related decision making, since the individual traveller's (dis)satisfaction with a travel purchase depends on a comparison of his/her expectation about the destination or a previously held destination image, and on his/her perceived performance of the destination (LaPage and Cormier 1977), it is an important determinant (Ritchie and Couch 2003).

Brand Equity

Brand equity is the value of a brand based on the extent to which it has a high brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, strong brand associations, and other assets such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships (Kotler and Armstrong 2001). It stems from the greater confidence that consumers place in a brand than they do in its competitors. This

confidence translates into consumer's loyalty and their willingness to pay a premium price for the brand.

Brand equity includes many dimensions such as performance, social image, value, trustworthiness, and identifications (Lassar, Mittal, and Sharma 1995). For the marketer, the brand is a value; the brand name of the product marketed by them should lead to attaining brand equity. For the consumer, a brand which accumulates benefits means benefits in the sense of utility and service. A brand is said to have equity when the consumers prefer to buy a branded one instead of an unbranded commodity. When consumers are able to recall the brand name and its attributes for the long period (Krishnakumar 2009), they react more (less) favourably to an element of the marketing mix for the brand than they do to the same marketing mix element when it is attributed to a fictitiously named or unnamed version of the product or service (Keller 1993). From this point of view, brand equity is the extension of brand loyalty and brand knowledge (Krishnakumar 2009).

Brand Identity

Brand identity is a part of the brand's overall equity, the total perception of a brand in the marketplace, driven mostly by its positioning and personality (Upshaw 1995). Brand identity clearly specifies what the brand aspires to stand for and has multiple roles:

1. It is a set of associations that the brand strategist seeks to create and maintain.
2. It represents a vision of how a particular brand should be perceived by its target public (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000).
3. Upon its projection the brand identity should help establish a relationship between a particular brand and its clientele by generating a value proposition potentially either involving benefits or providing credibility, which endorses the brand in question.

Aaker (1996) has developed a comprehensive brand identity planning model. At the heart of this model is a four-fold perspective on the concept of a brand. To help ensure that a firm's brand identity has texture and depth, Aaker, 1996 advises brand strategists to consider the brand as:

1. a product;
2. an organization;

3. a person; and
4. a symbol.

Each perspective is distinct. The purpose of this system is to help brand strategists consider different brand elements and patterns that can help clarify, enrich, and differentiate an identity. A more detailed identity will also help guide implementation decisions (Yoo, Donthu, and Lee 2000). The most important thing to keep in mind about a brand identity is that it lives entirely in the mind of the beholder. An identity is not what marketers create, but what consumers perceive as what has been created (Upshaw 1995).

Brand Positioning

The brand positioning task consists of three steps:

1. Identifying a set of possible competitive advantages upon which to build a position.
2. Selecting the right competitive advantage.
3. Effectively communicating and delivering the chosen position to a carefully selected target market (Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride 2004).

Marketers focus on differentiation branding through relationships and emotional appeals rather than through discernible, tangible benefits (Westwood et al. 1999), as it is clear that the most difficult task facing any destination is the quest for true differentiation. To create a fair, rounded and attractive picture of a country in people's minds, a balance must be maintained between the different images (Anholt 2002).

Brand positioning is what a brand stands for in the mind of consumers and prospects relative to its competition in terms of benefits and promises (Upshaw 1995). Brand positioning is a very important stage which involves the establishment of a fit between the supply and the demand perspectives on the destination attributes (Ndlovu 2009). Promotional mix plays an important role in positioning a destination. In order to promote tourism experiences, marketers have to think beyond traditional advertising techniques. As well as communicating the obvious, in marketing campaigns they need to bring brands to life by dazzling consumer senses, touching their hearts and stimulating their minds (Widdis 2001).

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of paper is to investigate the importance and role of branding in tourism with special reference to Manipur. It further identifies the initiatives taken up by the State government and Central government for promotion as well as branding the state as a tourist destination. Moreover it is an attempt to identify basic components of destination branding including cultural dimensions, historical dimensions and nature dimensions with respect to Manipur.

METHODOLOGY

The paper is descriptive in nature. The case study method has been used for exploring the indepth knowledge of the various branding components that are used for promoting the brand “Manipur” as one of the attractive tourist destination in the country. Various prominent tourist spots are selected for study. The primary data are collected from the government officials in the tourism department, Government of Manipur to provide a clear picture of the initiatives from the Government side. The secondary data are collected from various books, journals, periodicals and various government sources including tourism department. For analysis, tourist destination’s branding model (adapted from Saarinen 1997; Ooi 2001; Iliachenko 2005) is used. Moreover SWOT analysis is also conducted to identify the core competencies of the tourism sector in Manipur.

SWOT ANALYSIS OF MANIPUR TOURISM

The analysis of tourism in Manipur is necessary with respect to the business environment. The SWOT analysis seeks to develop a strategy by consolidating the strengths, overcoming the weaknesses, building on the opportunities and mitigating the threats of the external and internal environment and to provide a framework for further demand projections.

A. Strengths

- i. Wide variety of natural and cultural resources.
- ii. Moreh border town assumes great significance given the Look East Policy.
- iii. Loktak Lake is unique and so is the Keibul Lamjao floating National Park, home to the rare Sangai (Brow-Antlered) deer.
- iv. Medical facilities and adventure activities are of high quality and profound.

B. Weaknesses

- i. Accessibility and transportation bottlenecks.
- ii. Limited infrastructure of hotels, roads, water and power supply in terms of quality and service.
- iii. Insufficient exposure in tourism generating markets
- iv. No USP and poor brand positioning.
- v. Travel Permits system requirement.
- vi. Security situation.

C. Opportunities

- i. Moreh border town assumes significance because of the Look East Policy and the Trans Asian Highway. Trade and tourism can get a big boost by developing an international tourist circuit.
- ii. The natural beauty of Manipur is unparalleled and can be explored for nature and adventure tourisms.
- iii. The rich cultural heritage and the historical sites can be promoted for culture and pilgrimage tourisms.
- iv. Opportunity to get the private sector, tour operators and local community involved in a major way.

D. Threats

- i. A potential increase in tourism activities in the State can leave a significant footprint on the fragile ecology and environment.
- ii. Due to the present instable nature of the society in Manipur, tourists may face various issues of security and may also deter private investment.

APPLYING THE TOURIST DESTINATION'S BRANDING MODEL TO MANIPUR

The tourist destination's branding model (adapted from Saarinen 1997; Ooi 2001; Iliachenko 2005) is used for identifying Manipur as a potential tourist destination. Although some writers have asserted that destination branding is difficult, as a tourism product consists of many components (Riege et al. 2001; www.scribd.com), others have asserted that successful

cases from the tourism industry show that the complicated constructs of culture, history, and nature can be effectively used to create and market a unique image of a tourist destination (Saarinen 1997; Poimiroo 2000; Ooi 2001). Manipur is small state located in the north eastern corner of the India. The state is bestowed with beautiful natural landscape, with salubrious weather. It offers a wide variety of attractions such lakes, parks, gardens, waterfalls, mountains etc. The state is known for its distinct art forms. The various styles of Manipuri dances including Ras Lila, Nupa pala, Pung Cholom, Khamba Thoibi dance being some of the globally known forms for its uniqueness and rich culture. A number of festivals are celebrated in Manipur such as Li Haraoba, Yaoshang (Dol Jatra), Ratha Jatra, Festival of Kuki, Gang-Ngai, Sangai Festival etc which attract huge number of tourists from within the country and abroad every year.

(A). Nature Dimensions: Manipur, the land popularly referred to as the ‘Switzerland of India’ is the right tourist destination for nature lovers. Located in North East India amidst breathtaking blue hills, Manipur is amazingly soul-captivating. The name in itself means ‘A jeweled land’ and it is just right that the state was described the ‘Jewel of India’ by Late Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India. The state is rich in every sense, be it in the beauty of nature or the culture of the land. It has a pleasant climate, exotic greenery and varied flora. There are various tourist destinations on the basis of natural landscape.

- **Lakes and islands:** 48 kms from Imphal, the capital city, lies the largest fresh water lake in the North East India, the Loktak Lake, a miniature inland sea. There is a tourist Bungalow atop Sendra Island. Life on the lake includes small islands that are floating weed on which live the Lake People, the blue waters of lake and colourful water plants. There is a Sendra Tourist Home with an attached cafeteria in the middle of the lake. Floating islands are made out of the tangle of watery weeds and other plants. The wetland is swampy and is favourable for a number of species. It is in the district of Bishnupur. The Sendra Park and resort is opening on the top of Sendra Hills and attracting tourists.

- **Hills and Valleys:** Kaina is a hillock about 921 metres above sea level. It is a sacred place for Manipuri Hindus. The legend is that Shri Govindajee appeared in the dream of his devotees, Shri Jai Singh Maharaja and asked the Sainity king to install in a temple of Shri Govindajee. It was carved out of a jack fruit tree, which was then growing at Kaina. Its 29 kms from Imphal. The Dzukou Valley is in senapati district bordering with Kohima. There are seasonal flowers and a number of unique flora and fauna. Dzukou valley derives its meaning from Angami/Mao word that translates to Cold Water referring to the cold stream that flows through the valley. It is at an attitude of 2438 metres above sea level. The unique species of Siroi Lily is found abundantly in this valley. Six kilometers to the west of Imphal, at the foot of the pine growing hillocks at iroisemba on the Imphal-Kangchup Road are the Zoological Gardens. Some brow antlered deer (Sangai) are housed there.
- **Waterfalls:** Sadu Chiru waterfalls is near Ichum Keirap village, 27 kms from Imphal, in the Sadar Hill area, Senapati district. This consists of three falls with the first fall about 30 metres high. Angape Park is in the vicinity.
- **Natural Caves:** Thalon Cave (around 910 metres above sea level) is one of the historical sites of Manipur under tamenglong district. It is around 185 kms from Imphal. Khangkhui Cave is a natural limestone cave in Ukhrul district. The big hall in the cave is the darbar hall of the Devil King living deep inside while the northern hall is the royal bedroom, according to local folklore. During the World War II, villagers sought shelter here. This cave is an hour's trek from Khangkhui village.
- **Eco-Tourism:** Keibul lamjao National Park, 48 kms away from Imphal is an abode of the rare and endangered species of brow antlered deer. This eco-system contains 17 rare species of mammals. *It is only floating national park of the world.*

(B). Cultural Dimensions: Manipur is a state which has a very rich and diverse culture. Its known for its uniqueness and originality. The various cultural factors considered for study include theatre, dance, festivals etc which are the main driving forces for attracting huge

number of tourists every year. Secular theatre is mostly confined to themes that are not religious; it is performed in the secular or profane spheres. In these are Shumang lila and Phampak lila (stage drama). Shumang lila is very popular. Etymologically Shumang lila is the combination of "Shumang" (courtyard) and "Lila" (play or performance). It is performed in an area of 13×13 ft in the centre of any open space, in a very simple style without a raised stage, set design, or heavy props such as curtains, background scenery, and visual effects. It uses one table and two chairs, kept on one side of the performance space. Its claim as the "theatre of the masses" is underlined by the way it is performed in the middle of an audience that surrounds it, leaving one passage as entrance and exit.

The world of Phampak lila (stage drama) performed in the proscenium theatre is similar, in form, to the Western theatrical model and Indian Natyasastra model though its contents are indigenous. The so-called modern theatre descended on Manipuri theatre culture with the performance of Pravas Milan (1902) under the enthusiastic patronage of Sir Churchand Maharaj (1891–1941). The pace of theatrical movement was geared up with the institution of groups such as Manipur Dramatic Union (MDU) (1930), Arian Theatre (1935), Chitrangada Natya Mandir (1936), Society Theatre (1937), Rupmahal (1942), Cosmopolitan Dramatic Union (1968), and the Chorus Repertory Theatre of Ratan Thiyam (1976).[citation needed] These groups started experimenting with types of plays apart from historical and pauranic ones. Today Manipuri theatre is well respected because of excellent productions shown in India and abroad. Manipuri plays, both Shumang lila and stage lila, have been a regular feature in the annual festival of the National School of Drama, New Delhi.[citation needed]

The Chorus Repertory Theatre, Imphal, founded by Ratan Thiyam: Iskcon led by Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Swami started a network of schools in Northeastern India, where more than 4000 students receive education centred on Vaishnava spiritual values. In 1989 he founded "Ranganiketan Manipuri Cultural Arts Troupe", which has approximately 600 performances at over 300 venues in over 15 countries. Ranganiketan (literally "House of Colorful Arts") is a group of more than 20 dancers, musicians, singers, martial artists, choreographers and craft artisans. Some of them have received international acclaim.

Manipuri dance: Manipuri dance also known as Jagoi, is one of the major Indian classical dance forms, named after the state of Manipur. It is particularly known for its Hindu Vaishnavism themes, and exquisite performances of love-inspired dance drama of Radha-Krishna called Raslila. However, the dance is also performed to themes related to Shaivism, Shaktism and regional deities such as Umang Lai during Lai Haraoba. The roots of Manipuri dance, as with all classical Indian dances, is the ancient Hindu Sanskrit text Natya Shastra, but with influences from the culture fusion between India and southeast Asia.

Chorus Repertory Theatre: The auditorium of the theatre is on the outskirts of Imphal and the campus stretches for about 2 acres (8,100 m²). It has housing and working quarters to accommodate a self-sufficiency of life. The theatre association has churned out internationally acclaimed plays like Chakravyuha and Uttarpriyadashi. Its 25 years of existence in theatre had disciplined its performers to a world of excellence. Chakravyuha taken from the Mahabharat epic had won Fringe Firsts Award, 1987 at the Edinburgh International Theater Festival. Chakravyuha deals with the story of Abhimanyu (son of Arjun) of his last battle and approaching death, whereas Uttarpriyadashi is an 80-minute exposition of Emperor Ashoka's redemption.

Festivals: The festivals of Manipur are Lui-ngai-ni Ningol Chakouba, Yaoshang, Gan-ngai, Chumpha, Cheiraoba, Kang and Heikru Hidongba, as well as the broader religious festivals Eid-UI-Fitr, Eid-UI-Adha and Christmas. Most of these festivals are celebrated on the basis of lunar calendar. Almost every festival celebrated in other states of India is observed here, and it makes Manipur a mini metropolis. Some of the notable and popular festival in the state are:

(i) **Ningol Chakouba:** Held in November, this is a social festival of the Meeteis and many communities of Manipur where married women (Ningol) are invited (Chakouba, literally calling to a meal; for dinner or lunch) to a feast at their parental house with their children. Besides the feast, gifts are given to the women/invitees and to their children. It is the festival that binds and revives the family relations between the girls married away and the parental family. Nowadays, other communities have started celebrating this kind of a family-bonding festival. It is held every year on the 2nd lunar day of Heyangei (mostly during the month of

November; sometimes it falls in October). "Ningol" can mean a family's woman or a girl child and is not necessarily married

(ii) Kut: Held after the Harvest festival in November, this festival predominantly celebrated by Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribes in Manipur has become one of the leading festivals of the state. Kut is not restricted to a community or tribe — the whole state populace participates in merriment. On 1 November of every year the state declared holiday for Kut celebration. The festival is marked by cultural events such as traditional dances, folk dances, songs, sports and the Miss Kut contest. It is a festival of peace and thanksgiving to the Almighty for the harvests.

(iii) Yaosang: Held in February or March, Yaosang is one of the biggest festivals of Manipur.

(iv) Khuado Pawi: Khuado Pawi is the harvest festival of the Tedim people who were recognised as Sukte and Zomi in India and Myanmar respectively. The word Pawi means festival in Tedim Zomi language. It is celebrated every year in the month of September–October after harvesting.

(v) Cheiraoba: Also known as Sajibugi Nongma Panba and held in March or April, Cheiraoba is the new year of Manipur. It is observed on the first lunar day of the lunar month Sajibu (March/April) and so it is also popularly known as Sajibu Cheiraoba. People of Manipur clean and decorate their houses and make a sumptuous variety of dishes to feast upon after offering food to the deity on this day. After the feast, as a part of the rituals, people climb hill tops; in the belief that it would excel them to greater heights in their worldly life.

(vi) Gaan-Ngai: Gaan-Ngai is the greatest festival of the Zeliangrong people. It is a five-day festival and is usually performed on the 13th day of the Meetei month of Wakching as per the Meetei calendar of the lunar year.

(C). Historical Dimensions: Manipur, even though a small state in term of size, is linked to various historical importance. Manipur has its own unique and interesting history thousands of years back. Some of the prominent historical venues located in Manipur are as follows:

Shaheed Minar: The indomitable spirit of the patriotic Meitei and tribal martyrs, who sacrificed their lives while fighting the British in 1891, is commemorated by this tall Minar at Bir Tikendrajit Park in the heart of Imphal city.

Khwairamband Bazar/ Ima Market: A unique all women's market, having 3,000 or more "Imas" or mothers who run the stalls. It is splited into two sections on either side of a road. Vegetables, fruits, fishes and household groceries are sold on one side and exquisite handlooms and household tools on the other.

Kangla: The centre of Manipur's power till 1891, the historical embodiment of Manipur Rulers and the people of Manipur, Kangla have a significant place in the heart and mind of the people of Manipur Govindajee temple, outer and inner moat and other relics are perfect reflections of the rich art and culture of Manipur and her civilization.

Shree Shree Govindajee Temple: A historic Vaishnavite centre, adjoining Manipur's former Maharajas' Royal Palace, the Govindajee temple is one of the most attractive sights for the tourists. Twin domes, a paved courtyard, and a large raised congregation hall form a perfect backdrop for priests who descend the steps, to accept offerings from devotees in the courtyard. The shrines of Lord Krishna and Balaram and Jagannath flank the two sides of the presiding deity. Early hours Prayer (Aarti) is a must for devoted followers, exudingspiritual fervour and ecstasy.

Manipur State Museum: This interesting Museum near the Polo Ground has a fairly good collection and display of Manipur's tribal heritage and a collection of portraits of Manipur's former rulers. Particularly interesting items are costumes, arms & ammunitions, relics and historical documents.

War Cemetery: Commemorating the memories of the British and Indian soldiers who died during the World War II, these War Cemeteries are managed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Serene and well maintained, the War Cemetery carries little stone markers and bronze plaques recording the sacrifice of those gallant soldiers.

INA Memorial Complex: The Indian National Army (INA) Complex is located at Moirang, a town in Bishnupur District, around 45 KM from Imphal. This complex has a historical significance and associated with a very important event in the Indian freedom struggle and World War II. INA Martyrs Memorial complex at Moirang was established in 1985. The complex has a museum and a library. The complex has a statue of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose and a museum which exhibits letters, photographs, badges of ranks and other articles associated with the INA movement. Tourists, particularly from Japan, regularly visit the memorial complex to pay homage to their forefathers who had lost their lives in Manipur during World War II. The Japanese government has decided to construct a hospital in the memory of their forefather who died in Manipur during the war. Since its inception, the office of the Memorial has been organizing annually the Birthday of Netaji (23rd January), Flag Hoisting Day (14th April), and the Azad Hind Hukumat Day.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The tourism strength of the state has been identified and lies in Nature-Eco tourism, culture tourism, historical tourism and adventure tourism. These specific areas have been given top priority and developed with renewed zeal and efforts. The state is known for its beautiful natural landscape because of which the then Prime Minister, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru named it Switzerland of East. The state is rich in every sense, be it in the beauty of nature or the culture of the land. It has a pleasant climate, exotic greenery and varied flora. Manipur is a state which has a very rich and diverse culture. It's known for its uniqueness and originality. The various cultural factors include theatre, dance and festivals etc which are the main driving forces for attracting huge number of tourists every year. The state has a huge potential for being as one of the top tourist destination in the country. The concept of branding is not taken into serious consideration in the promotional activities. The brand image needs to be created with the unique attributes. The brand positioning is also lacking which needs to be done in order to identify the blissful tourist spots which are unique and different throughout.

But in many aspects the Manipur as a brand are interlinked with its unique culture, dances, historical importance etc. which are well known throughout the globe. To many extend, it creates value to its tourists as well as the various stakeholders of the tourism sector in the state. So the relevant authority needs to promote and brand the state in a different way. A unique brand to market Manipur as a tourist destination has to be created in conformity with the modernity, relevance, competitiveness, strategic location and commercial aspects of the state. For this very specific purpose, the Government has come up with a catchy theme “Gateway to South-East Asia” to promote tourism in Manipur on a clientele model.

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