

## SACRED GROVES OF UMANGLAI: A POTENTIAL FOR PILGRIMAGE TOURISM IN MANIPUR

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### **Abstract**

*Pilgrimage tourism has emerged as an instrument for employment generation, and sustainable human development. It promotes international understanding and gives support to local cultural and traditional activities, religious practices, customary laws, culinary heritage, textile heritage, etc. It is also known as faith/religious/spiritual tourism. It has much historical significance. It is also a part of cultural and heritage tourism. Pilgrimage tourism has a great influence on the daily life of local residents which can be summarized into four aspects: economic impacts, social impacts, cultural impacts, and environmental impacts. Though worship, celebrations, and rituals, pilgrimage provides believers with a spiritual experience, satisfying their needs for physical health, mindfulness, spiritual experiences, socializations, motivations, and connectedness to nature, and thus may be regarded as a form of ritual well-being tourism.*

*The objective of the paper is to study the sacred places of Umanglai in the hill and plain of Manipur for promoting pilgrimage tourism in the state. Tourism potentials of the state regarding the Manipur Tourism Policy are also discussed in the paper. The paper also aims at the development possibilities through pilgrimage tourism in the hill and valley areas of Manipur and the spiritual circuit in Manipur under Swadesh Darshan Scheme which was launched by Union Minister of Tourism. The present paper is prepared from the perspectives of historical, social, religious and anthropological studies of Manipur and pure research work also.*

### **Keywords**

*Pilgrimage, Umanglai, Public Private Partnership, Industry*

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## **Introduction**

Pilgrimage tourism, is a type of tourism motivated partially or fully by religious sentiments or purposes focused on visiting sacred or holy places. Manipur is a land of many religions having their major pilgrimage centres in different parts of the state. Religion and spirituality are key factors of motivation for travel with major tourist destinations having developed largely as a result of their connection to sacred places, persons and events. The growth of domestic tourism largely depends on pilgrimage tourism. To tap this potential there is a need for holistic development of the selective pilgrimage destinations in cooperation with other stakeholders. It will also provide funding for maintaining the religious sites in the region.

Manipur Tourism Policy, 2022 envisages new initiatives towards making tourism the catalyst in employment generation, environmental re-generation, development of remote areas and development of women and other disadvantaged groups in the State, besides promoting social integration. Manipur with its inherent tourism potential, rich cultural heritage and vibrant pool of youth, with excellent grip over English language is an ideal combination for promotion of tourism in the region. Manipur tourism was given an industry status in January 1987. Since then, the Manipur Government has been making efforts in developing Manipur Tourism by developing Infrastructures, Hotels & Restaurants, Human Resource, and through active Marketing, Publicity, Promotion Programmes, Market Research, etc. Manipur and its tourism policy become all the more important in view of India's Look (Act) East Policy, the Trans-Asian Highways and the 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 modern outlook, relevance, competitiveness, strategic location, tourism potentials, and commercial aspects, etc. It is felt that once the appropriate infrastructure and services are suitably placed, Manipur is destined to become a popular tourist destination in South-East Asia.

Through PRASHAD, a National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive, Ministry of Tourism also have a vision to rejuvenate pilgrimage and spiritual experience of the tourists through availability of well-planned tourism infrastructure enabling tourist convenience, accessibility, security, cleanliness, experience and revitalize / preserve the soul of the pilgrimage/ heritage city through integrated, inclusive and sustainable developments that would spur employment opportunities for the local communities.

## **Pilgrimage Tourist Destinations in Manipur**

Manipur is known as "Land of Jewels" and "Switzerland of India". The

State is blended with the majestic Loktak Lake, the strategic location of Moreh town, the uniqueness of the floating Keibul-Lamjao National Park and the Sangai, the brow antlered deer, the beauty of the Dzukou Lilies, along with the naturally formed limestone caves, pristine green hills and valleys, pilgrimage sites, meandering rivers and waterfalls, cascading rapids, exotic flora & fauna complimented by a rich arts and culture, dance and music, folklore, myths and legends, indigenous games and artistic handloom and handicrafts. All these combinations make Manipur a little paradise on earth and an enticing destination for a tourist to explore. The Asian Development Bank has identified the region as a 'Key Area' due to its 'unrealized potential as an eco-tourism product'. Manipur is now on the map of world War Tourism with World War-II sites which includes Imphal War Cemetery, the Imphal Peace Museum at Red Hill and the historical battle sites of Anglo-Manipur war of 1891. With planned and professional harnessing of tourism potential, Manipur is likely to become a famous tourist destination which in turn would help in increasing both domestic and international tourist arrivals as well as generating the much needed employment, socio-economic benefit, revenue and other ancillary benefits to the state of Manipur.

The tiny hill state is blessed with rich and diverse natural, historic, traditional, cultural and spiritual resources. Thousands of tourists from the domestic and international places come to Manipur to experience its spiritual prowess and Manipur's rich cultural heritage. Manipur being a land of many religions have centres of pilgrimage for various faiths since ages and these have immensely contributed to the development of Manipur heritage and traditional values. In fact, religion, spirituality and heritage are common motivations for travel, with major tourist destinations having developed largely as a result of their connections to holy or historic places, persons, and events, etc.

However, pilgrimage tourism destinations are not like holiday/leisure tourism destinations, which are primarily targeted at the segment having inclination to travel and spend. In developing a pilgrimage tourism product, it is essential to build in community participation at the given destination. Further, it is not only important to provide modern amenities at pilgrimage sites but also to see as to how the visitor interacts and seeks new experiences at such places. There is a need to identify core deficiencies and problems, facilitate provision of products, services and subsequently address the issues that are important for paving the way for development and promotion of pilgrimage tourism in Manipur.

Manipur Government had been giving much priority to develop the tourism sector as the state was endowed with natural scenic beauty and it would be easy to

bring up at the international level. The spiritual circuit in Manipur under Swadesh Darshan Scheme a National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive which was launched by Union Minister of Tourism comprises five components- Shree Govindajee Temple, Shree Bijoy Govindajee Temple, Shree Gopinath Temple, Shree Bangshibodon Temple and Shree Kaina Temple. It was developed under the Swadesh Darshan Scheme of the Tourism Ministry with a sanction amount of about Rs. 53 crore and Manipur Public Works Department is the work agency of these projects. There are many other pilgrimage tourism spots like the sacred places of Umanglai. Umanglais, the tutelary, ancestral, domestic, sylvan and clan deities of the indigenous people of Manipur which are worshipping especially by celebrating a ritual festival popularly known as Umanglai Haraoba. There are about 150 Umanglais residing in above 700 shrines and Holy places in the different parts of North Eastern India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Some of the important Holy sites of Umanglai which can be developed as places of pilgrimage tourism are given in the following.

1. Thangjing Laiphahlen of Thangjing Hill
2. Marijing Laiphahlen of Heingangching,
3. Wangbrel Laiphahlen of Anal Khullen, Chandel district,
4. Koubru Laiphahlen of Koubru Hill
5. Sanamahi Kiyong and Khalong of Nongmaiching,
6. Sanamahi Laimanai of Thinungei
7. Chingdai Ching Laiphahlen,
8. Chingu Pangalba of Nongchup Ingourok,
9. Nongpok Ningthou Laiphahlen, Ingourok,
10. Thongam Mondum Laiphahlen,
11. Nongpok Ningthou Panthoibi Laiphahlen of Kwatha,
12. Nongchup Ingourok Laiphahlen of Leimakhong,
13. Umanglai Laikons of Thanga and Karang,
14. Panam Ningthou Laiphahlen of Andro,
15. Koubru Laiphahlen of Sekmai,
16. Echum Lairembi of Khurkhul,
17. Umanglai laikon of Phayeng,
18. Loyalakpa Laiphahlen of Leimaram,
19. Khuman Pokpa Laiphahlen of Mayang Imphal and Tokpaching,
20. Nongpok Ningthou-Panthoibi of Kwatha,

21. Nongpok Ingourok Laiphahlen
22. Tampha Lairembi Laiphahlen of Wangoo,
23. Wangoo Leihao, Wangoo
24. Heibok Ningthou of Heibokching,
25. Khamlangba Laiphahlen of Kakching,
26. Khoiriphaba Laiphahlen of Nambol,
27. Chaningleima Laiphahlen of Phoiching
28. Korouhanba Laiphahlen of Moidangpok
29. Kothoujam Lairembi Laiphahlen
30. Wangoi Sanamahi Laiphahlen
31. Oknarel and Macha Ebumma Laiphahlen of Ningthoukhong
32. Chingthang Lairembi Laiphahlen of Bamdiar
33. Mongbahanba Laiphahlen, Sanjenthong
34. Puruksoubi Laiphahlen, Kongba
35. Chingkhulakpa, Chingkhu
36. Ekop Ningthou, Tentha
37. Esingchaiba and Santhong Ningthou, Kumbi
38. Huidon Lairembi, Yurembam
39. Naothingkhong Pakhangba, Patsoi
40. Huikap Ningthou, Huikap
41. Haoreima Sampubi, Yaingangpokpi
42. Pukshri Lairembi, Sarik Konjil
43. Lainingthou Sanamahi Laiphahlen, 1<sup>st</sup> MR
44. Kangkhui Cave, Ukhrul,
45. Kharam Thadoi Laiphahlen, Kharam Pallel
46. Pakhangba Laiphahlen, Leimatak
47. Langol Lairembi and Tarung Lairembi of Langol Hill
48. Lai Khurembi Laiphahlen of Lamdeng
49. Sanamahi Laiphahlen, Taothong,
50. Phouoibi Laiphahlen, Ithai
51. Wangbren Laiphahlen of Suganu and Serou
52. Thumkhong Lairembi of Chandrakhong, Nongpok Keithelmanbi and Maphou Dam
53. Ereima Laiphahlen, Sagolmang
54. Pan Santhong Nungyungbi, Moirang santhong

55. Santhong Apanba, Chanam Santhok
56. Pureiromba Laiphahlen, Lamlai
57. Thambal Lairembi, Tentha Thambal Chingya
58. Tarang Saraba, Yairipok Kwarok,
59. Kounu Laiphahlen, Kounu Ching
60. Kangba Khubam, Kangmong
61. Nungkhong Nunglaobi, Nongmaiching
62. Chingoi Maru, Nongmaiching
63. Chingkhei Ningthou, Chingkheiching
64. Kondong Lairembi, Moreh
65. Lokningthou, Nungoo and Tangjeng
66. Luwangpokpa, Luwangsangbam
67. Lam Ahingba Keinou
68. Tangleipung, Oinam
69. Nganuleima, Keibul
70. Pureiromba, Chajing
71. Chingkhamb Ningthou, Chingkhamb
72. Samuroulakpa, Samurou,
73. Chingkheilakpa Pakhangba, Dolaitabi
74. Pakhangba, Lameidong
75. Pangalba, Isingthembi
76. Sendra Ningthou, Sendra
77. Mahou Phaibokching, Suganu
78. Hiyangthang Lairembi Laiphahlen
79. Nungthong and Konok Erel, Serou
80. Emoinu Laiphahlen, Chengeiching
81. Chothe Thangwai Pakhangba, Chothe Nungsukching
82. Khabi Maibi Yumpham, Lamdeng
83. Phouoibiching, Ningel
84. Khagemba Laiphahlen, Nungeiching
85. Ladaipung Mari-Ahongpung, Soudonpung, Wangtholbipung, Kakwa Lamdaipung
86. Tokpapung, Nongmeipung, Lalampung, Singjupung, Phouoibi Nongka Pung,  
Lairembi Taret pung, Wangampung, Watongpung, Taobapung, Loklaopung,  
Pheidapung....

and many more pilgrimage sites which are not fully explored yet as good sites for pilgrimage tourism. For generations, thousands of pilgrims have been tracking to the peaks of Mt. Koubru, Thangjing, Nongmaiching, etc. to offer prayers and to protect the sacred places. Most of the sacred places of Umanglai located at hills of Manipur have great historical, cultural and ecological significance of the indigenous people of Manipur who believe in common ancestors. One more important point is that most of the Holy Places of Umanglai are also important sacred groves which have great biodiversity values. All such places of historical and religious significance should be declared as heritage sites by the State Government by passing/ amending necessary laws in this regard with proper consultation with all the stakeholders. Indigenous communities of Manipur must collectively own these sacred places/ pilgrimage sites as common heritage. No individual or organisation or community should claim exclusive rights over these Holy places.

The state of Manipur can be divided into hill and valley geographically. About 90% of the total area of Manipur lie in the hill area and is endowed with natural and scenic beauty of hill and mountain ranges. In spite of the vastness of the region and the scenic beauties the hill region has, the infrastructure is still very poor and needs to be developed in order to exploit the tourism potential. Besides, the infrastructure bottleneck, there are also critical areas that need to be looked into such as lack of awareness about the potentials of pilgrimage tourism industry, shortage of accommodation, roads and bridges, transport supplier, road side amenities such as eateries, trained manpower such as tour managers or guides etc. The mind-set of the youths to start their own enterprises and the hurdles to take up entrepreneurship as alternative career option is still a concern in the developmental process of pilgrimage tourism as lucrative business venture in the valley and hilly areas of Manipur.

### **Observations**

It is clear that the policy framework and governance mechanisms in Manipur for religious or pilgrimage tourism are not adequate. In addition, the complexities that have been raised due to the transformation from traditional pilgrimage practices to a modern religious tourism economy have created significant tensions. It has been identified that at the local level, the management of the tourism department is highly conscious about its promotional and management style and processes, but they do not address the negative environmental impacts in any sense. Furthermore, the researcher has observed that there is an institutional gap in dealing with the direct and indirect impacts of religious or pilgrimage tourism in Manipur including systematic and structural problems. Hence, there is a significant need to align religious practitioners and government agencies to step forward from the traditional platform

and attain sustainable pilgrimage tourism in the region.

It is also clear that conservation of the environment is one of the major concerns of pilgrimage tourism regulators. It has been well depicted in the study that in pilgrimage tourism, the concern of tourists and religious actors towards the environment is relatively low in the state. In addition, the focus on service quality is far more when compared to the environmental and infrastructural quality. If there are deficits in marketing communication, poor infrastructure and other areas, this could deter the development of pilgrimage and religious tourism which is an enormous sector and niche market in Manipur. Changes will consistently arise from the need to meet and exceed the requirements of pilgrimage tourists to holy sites as valued consumers. Furthermore, the concern towards pilgrimage tourism for development in a sustainable way is greatly needed in the state. The importance of pilgrimage tourism in Manipur is relatively high because the people of the state are highly religious and cultural in nature. Hence, it is significant to maintain such infrastructure and safeguard the place as well.

### **Conclusion**

Looking at the potentials of pilgrimage tourism industry in the Manipur and the opportunities it provides, development possibilities definitely are there and the youths residing in the state of Manipur may consider taking up tourism related activities as profitable enterprises and may consider the same as viable career options. The Public Private Partnership (PPP) model of developing pilgrimage tourism industry in Manipur may also be pursued and spirit to ease the growth of the industry. It is imperative to frame significant policies and strategies for sustainable development in Manipur pilgrimage tourism which should be followed by every member of the country including external visitors. In addition, the objective to safeguard the environment and reduce pollutions for sustainable development must be aligned by both government and local agencies for making such implementation possible and putting it into effect. On the other hand, mass education needs to be provided to the visitors and local agencies for comprehending the various issues associated with pilgrimage tourism in the state. Furthermore, prohibition of certain materials or activities needs to be done by the government towards elimination of the prime cause of pollution including plastics, waste disposal, water disposal and air pollution created through ritual practices at temples. This would certainly assist to safeguard the environment as well as lead to sustainable development along with preservation of man-made objects of value and resources of the region.

The viability of this research work for other countries and pilgrimage tourism opens the opportunities for future additional research initiatives. The quantitative

aspect of the study is also a new scope for future research with the use of quantitative resources for attaining more generalized results. The demographic variables could be also integrated and accessed accordingly for developing accurate results based on the particular research area. It is also a significant scope for future research. Some of the further objectives of the study are -to analyse the issues associated with pilgrimage tourism for sustainable development; to explore the needs and benefits associated with sustainable development in the field of pilgrimage tourism in Manipur; to offer significant solutions for the development of sustainable measures for enhancing pilgrimage tourism in Manipur, etc. to bring about *Spirituality and Wellness Tourism*.

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