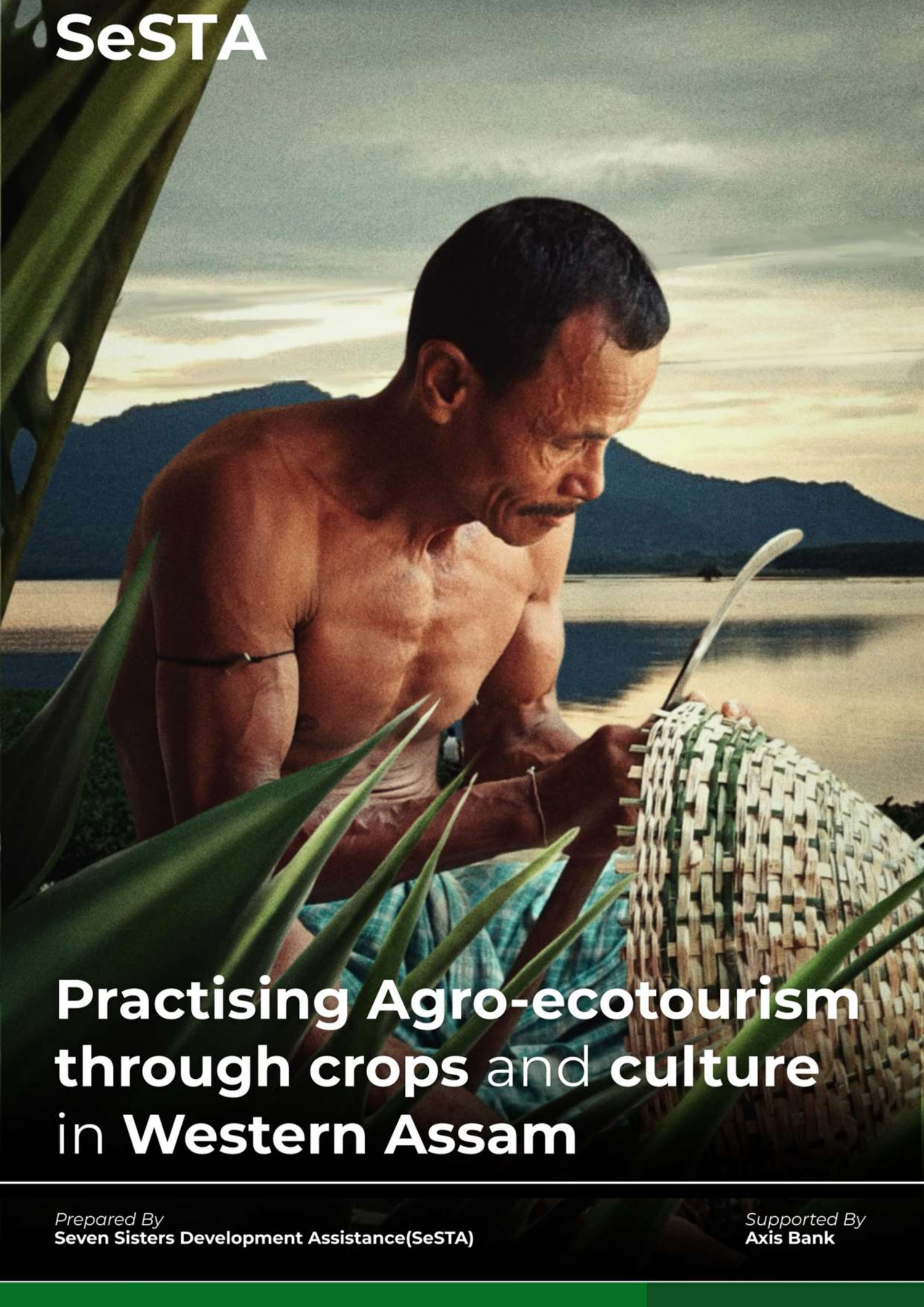




SeSTA

Practising Agro-ecotourism through crops and culture in Western Assam

Prepared By
Seven Sisters Development Assistance(SeSTA)

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Axis Bank

Practicing Agro-ecotourism through crops and culture in Western Assam

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List of abbreviations

ASRLM: Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission

Beel: Wetland

BPM: Block Project Manager

CSR: Corporate Social Responsibility

DFO: Divisional Forest Officer

FGD: Focused Group Discussion

JFMC: Joint Forest Management Committee

KVK: Krishi Vigyan Kendra

MCF: Material Collection Facility

NABARD: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development

NGO: Non-Government Organisation

PRA: Participatory Rural Appraisal

SeSTA: Seven Sisters Development Assistance

SHG: Self Help Group

VH: Village Head

3. Executive Summary

This research explores the integrated potential for agro-ecotourism around Western Assam- Sutki, Hatigaon and Nishangram in Goalpara district and two significant wetlands in Tamranga & Doloni Beel in Bongaigaon district. These wetlands, known for their biodiversity and traditional fisheries, also serve as the cultural heartbeat of their regions, supporting the livelihoods of communities steeped in distinctive agricultural and artisanal traditions. Despite facing ecological challenges; from habitat degradation to invasive species; both beel remain essential as sources of income and as community spaces for festivals and traditional events. Recent government steps such as infrastructure improvements and eco-tourism master plans highlight growing recognition of their ecological and economic value.

The primary objectives of this study are to map existing tourism opportunities, possibilities for further development, assess current agricultural practices, and specifically document the experiences and aspirations of women entrepreneurs who are increasingly at the forefront of community-led change. Special attention is paid to integrating traditional practices such as community fishing events and local festivals into sustainable tourism models that celebrate local culture while safeguarding the environment.

Qualitative methods research combining focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and case studies are used for this study. This approach ensures not only a quantitative mapping of opportunities but also a qualitative capture of community aspirations, struggles, and innovations. Collaborations with local organizations, women's groups, and institutional stakeholders (including Krishi Sakhis and Self-Help Groups) are foundational to this process.

The study concludes that with coordinated intervention-from enhancing basic infrastructure to targeted training and leveraging government and NGO support- Sutki, Hatigaon and Nishangram and Tamranga Beel & Doloni Beel can become successful models for integrated, community-driven agro-ecotourism in Assam. The areas of Hatigaon and Nishangram have already been in the scene for tourism and natural farming but developing models will promise not only conservation gains and income diversification but also a renewed sense of pride and agency for the rural communities who call these wetlands home.



Pic 1. Tamranga Beel



Pic. 2. Doloni Beel

4. Introduction

Agro-ecotourism is a sustainable form of tourism that combines agriculture, ecology, and rural livelihoods, allowing visitors to experience farming, biodiversity, and local culture within a natural environment. It combines the ideas of ecotourism, which encourages responsible travel and environmental preservation, with agro-tourism, which involves involving visitors in agricultural activities. Agro-ecotourism promotes environmental awareness, cultural preservation, and participatory learning among tourists and locals in addition to providing additional revenue for rural areas.

It is essentially a symbiotic approach in which community-based livelihoods are strengthened and sustainable rural development is promoted by the convergence of farming, conservation, and education.

This study focuses on the Agro-ecotourism potential centered around three villages in Assam's Goalpara district- Sutki, Hatigaon and Nishangram, and Tamranga Beel & Doloni Beel (Sankarghola) in Bongaigaon district. These villages are located in the lush, ecologically rich foothills near the Assam- Meghalaya border, characterized by rolling terrain, fertile alluvial plains, and consists of small water bodies and wetlands supporting diverse agricultural activities. The landscape is marked by a mosaic of rain fed and irrigated farmland with crops such as turmeric, millet, beans, and vegetables. The villages are predominantly inhabited by the Garo tribal community, whose culture and traditions form an integral part of the region's identity.

The study is significant from the fact that the selected study areas have enormous potential and scope for establishing tourism as an important sector of the economy. But despite having such potentiality the place has yet to establish a niche in tourism due to a host of countless problems. Ecologically sustainable tourism is the means to keep the natural scenic beauty, exotic flora and fauna and places of historical and religious importance intact. Ecotourism is the most feasible protective measure for conservation and preservation of natural and heritage sites, provided strict rules and guidelines are followed in maintaining such places of interest. This sort of tourism has been gaining ground as ecologically responsible tourism.

Hatigaon, declared as a natural farming village and Nishangram, already having tourism onboard are known for their verdant surroundings, community farming initiatives, and proximity to forested hills, contributing to biodiversity that attracts nature-based activities and bird-watching. Sutki village similarly features a blend of agriculture, fisheries, and crafts, fostering a rural economy interwoven with natural resource stewardship. The terrain and hydrology support natural farming practices and fishing, while local festivals and artisanal crafts enrich the cultural fabric.

Similarly, Tamranga Beel & Doloni Beel in Bongaigaon district, formed by the confluence of two natural lakes and nourished by the Brahmaputra's floodwaters, holds high ornithological significance. It serves as a sanctuary for migratory birds and has traditionally played a central role in local cultural and livelihood practices, especially fisheries linked with seasonal festivals like Magh and Bohag Bihu. The wetland's biodiversity, paired with its serene landscapes, renders it a promising site for integrated community-led tourism initiatives.

The villages -Nishangram, Damra, Agia (Sutki) in Goalpara, and Sankarghola in Bongaigaon District are predominantly home to tribal communities such as the Garo and Rabha. These communities maintain diverse livelihoods rooted in agriculture, natural farming, livestock, fishing, and handicrafts.

However, despite abundant natural and cultural resources, the full potential for tourism-based economic development remains largely untapped due to infrastructural gaps, limited institutional support, and community hesitance.

Agro-ecotourism offers a pathway to simultaneously preserve ecological integrity and cultural heritage, while providing alternative livelihoods and empowering marginalized groups, especially women and youth. This study aims to thoroughly explore the scope for such sustainable tourism in these villages, integrating traditional knowledge and modern conservation principles.

5. Objectives of the study

This research aims to assess and harness the untapped potential for integrated agro-ecotourism around Sutki, Hatigao, Nishangram area of Goalpara and Tamranga Beel & Doloni Beel in Sankarghola, Bongaigaon, aiming to promote ecological conservation, livelihood diversification, and inclusive community development.

Specific objectives include:

1. To identify and record existing natural, cultural, and infrastructural assets related to agro-ecotourism, including agro-ecological practices, festivals, crafts, and home-stays accommodations in the selected villages and wetland areas.
2. Community Livelihood and Agricultural Practices Assessment:
3. To understand current farming systems, natural resource use, fisheries management, and other livelihood activities, with a focus on natural and organic farming practices, and how these can be integrated into tourism offerings.
4. To evaluate the role and aspirations of women entrepreneurs in agro-ecotourism, examining their existing engagement, capacity gaps, and opportunities for leadership in home-stays, craft production, and ancillary services.

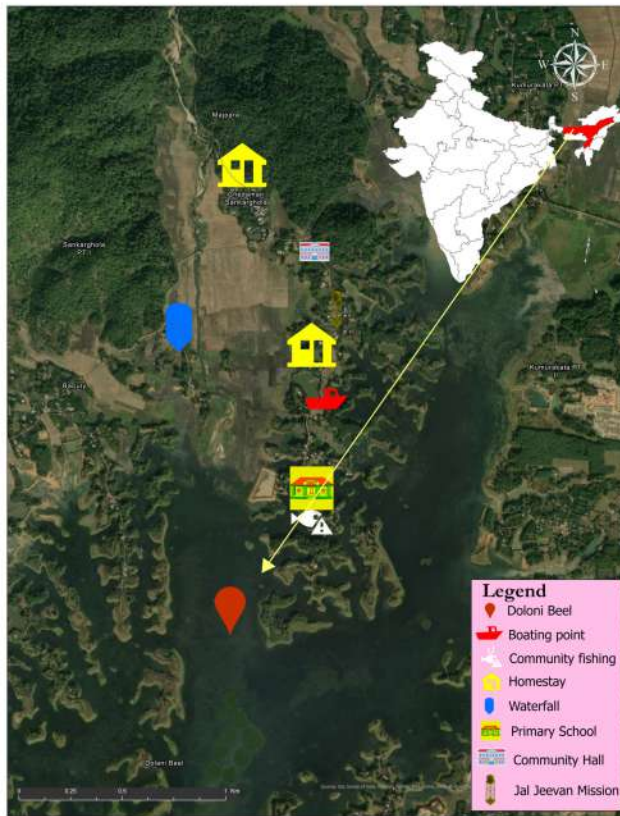
By achieving these objectives, the study aims to provide a foundation for sustainable rural development strategies leveraging the rich natural and cultural heritage of Assam's wetlands, fostering resilience, empowerment, and conservation.

6. Study Context

Village Profile: Geography, Demographics, and Culture

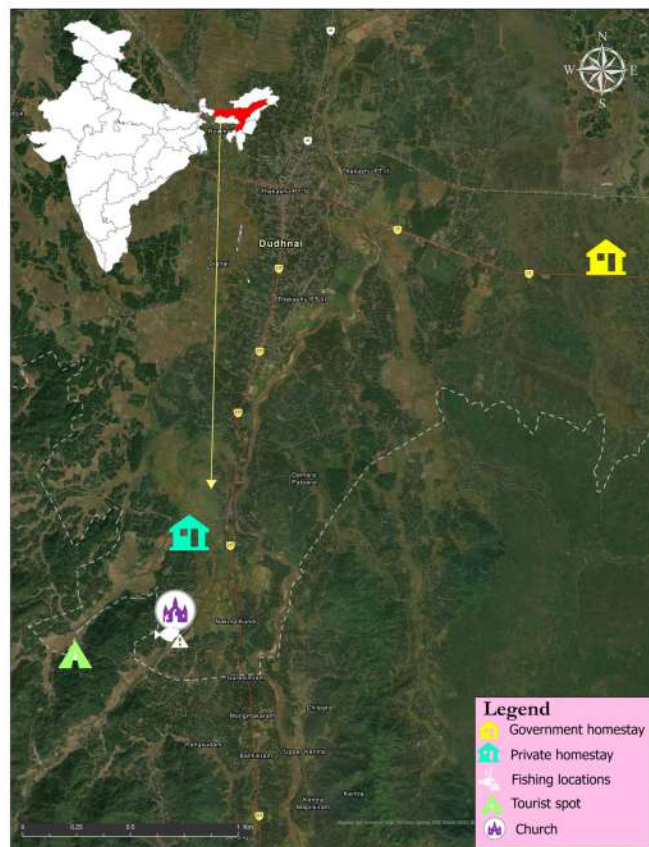
The villages of Sutki, Hatigaon, and Nishangram are situated in the heart of Goalpara district, Assam, near the border with Meghalaya's Garo Hills. Sutki lies in Balijana [h1] tehsil, characterized by fertile alluvial plains, small water bodies, and semi-forested terrain. The village is home to approximately 875 people across 160 families, and is known for its intimate community networks and rich agricultural traditions. Nishangram[h1], located about 7 km from Dudhnai (sub-district headquarters) and around 45 km from Goalpara town, covers nearly 180 hectares. The village's population of about 1,250 is almost entirely from Scheduled Tribes, predominantly the Garo community, with a sex ratio close to parity and a high literacy rate exceeding 83%. The area is well-connected by public and private bus services and is accessible by rail within 10 km, facilitating movement of agricultural goods and access to essential services.

Hatigaon is located in Lakhipur subdivision, about 34 km from the district headquarters and surrounded by vibrant rural settlements and farmlands. It has a population of around 777, mainly from tribal communities, and includes around 168 households. The literacy rate hovers above 62%, and the village benefits from public transport links and proximity to key market towns.



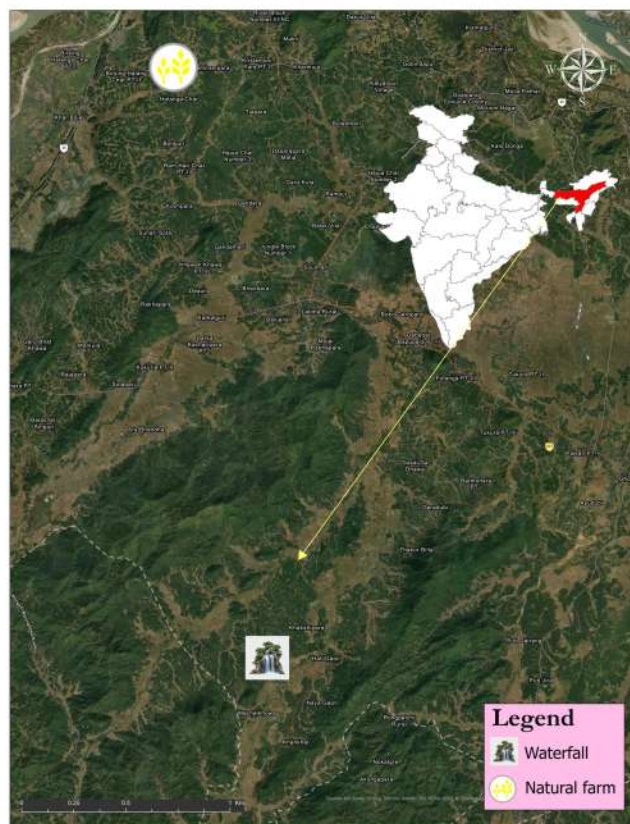
Map 1. Sankarghola

Map 2. Nishangram



These villages exhibit rich cultural and social traditions, shaped by Garo and Rabha tribal heritage. Community events, seasonal festivals, and artisan crafts foster social cohesion and transmit intergenerational knowledge.

Their landscapes are lush, marked by rain fed farmland, proximity to hills and forests, and a mosaic of paddy, vegetable plots, and small fisheries.



Map 3. Sutki NC



Map 3. Hatigao

6.1 Current Agricultural Practices

The agricultural landscape is diverse, with villagers practicing natural and organic farming. Crops such as turmeric, millet, beans, maize, sesame, and rosella thrive alongside livestock, poultry, and artisanal aquaculture. Producer organizations and SHGs facilitate collective farming, skill sharing, and periodic participation in market networks. Although rubber plantation has emerged as a significant cash crop, experts and some farmers express concerns about its ecological impacts and loss of crop diversity in recent years.

Farmers have benefitted from training initiatives conducted by Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) and NGOs, focusing on nursery management, mushroom cultivation, vermicompost, and skills to improve sustainable productivity and market readiness. Women are active not merely as agricultural workers but also as contributors to household food security and primary caretakers of kitchen gardens.

7. Research Methodology

7.1 Methodology:

This study adopted qualitative methods, participatory approach to capture the nuanced experiences, perceptions, and aspirations of rural communities regarding agro-ecotourism. Emphasis was placed on community voices, direct observation, and triangulation of insights from interviews of diverse stakeholders.

7.2 Sampling and Site Selection

Purposive Sampling: Villages with known agricultural diversity, active Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and preliminary tourism potential were purposively selected. Sites included Nishangram, Damra, Agia (Sutki), and Sankarghola, representing different community profiles within Assam.

Respondent Categories: Participants included women's groups, village heads, panchayat officials, government department representatives (KVK, agriculture, Block, etc), SHG leaders, and youth collectives.

7.3 Data Collection Methods:

a. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Two numbers of semi-structured FGDs were conducted with women, men, and youth in each village. Discussions explored agricultural practices, livelihood challenges, willingness for tourism involvement, and community readiness.

b. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):

In-depth interviews were done with panchayat officials, government officers Principal Scientist, KVK; Block Project Manager; Tourism Officer, and SHG leaders in each villages to gather institutional perspectives and experience-based insights.

c. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) Tools:

Visual methods: such as resource mapping, skill mapping were employed to identify assets, gaps, local innovations, and sites of tourism potential done with the women groups where they showed their locations and houses for homestay possibilities.

7.4 Data Recording and Management

All interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed. Field notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and contextual observations. Data from maps and participatory tools were digitized and appended as annexure for transparency and reference.

7.4.1 Ethical Considerations

Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained, and culturally appropriate protocols were observed throughout the research process. Sensitivity to language and literacy barriers were ensured by using vernacular translators where needed.

7.5 Existing Tourism Potential and Initiatives

Tourism, while in its infancy, is regarded as a promising avenue for economic diversification. Homestay accommodations exists in Nishangram, often operated by women or supported by

government schemes under the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission (ASRLM). The village's scenic beauty, unique traditional cuisine and crafts, and festivities present opportunities for immersive rural tourism.

Birdwatching in the beels nearby (Doloni and Tamranga in Bongaigaon & Urpada in Goalpara), nature walks through the hills and waterfalls (both in Goalpara and Bongaigaon), fishing competitions, and community events form the core of current tourism offerings. Women-led enterprise such as Green Cafe in Goalpara town showcases local organic produce, crafts, and food. These ventures, alongside eco-tourism camps and stakeholder-driven festivals, aim to reduce reliance on forest resources and foster alternative livelihoods.



Pic. 7. FGD with the SHG women



Pic. 8. Fishery in Nishangram



Pic. 9. Farmlands and dustbins in Nishangram



Pic. 10. Vermicompost beds in Nishangram

Despite these strengths, infrastructural gaps-such as road connectivity and sanitation, alongside social hesitance and limited technical capacity persist. Increased coordination among local leaders, government institutions, and NGOs is needed to address these challenges and realize the full potential of agro-ecotourism in Sutki, Hatigaon, and Nishangram of Goalpara & Sankarghola in Bongaigaon.

Tamranga Beel and Doloni Beel, situated in Bongaigaon district, complement the wetland system of the region and is a haven for migratory birds, especially during seasonal influxes. It is fed by

floodwaters from the Brahmaputra and formed by the confluence of two natural lakes. The lake sustains local livelihoods through fisheries and agriculture and holds cultural significance for associated tribal communities.

The area regardless of its beauty and tourist attraction is a bit far from the main road and limits accessibility of people. Moreover, the drinking water and sanitation facilities needs to be worked on within this village as guests will need that basic amenities. Adding these, the area and people can boost with the tourism and have a stable earning and exposure as well.

7.5.1 Community perspective and discussions

The community perspectives gathered from villages such as Nishangram, Damra, Agia (Sutki), Sankarghola, and surrounding areas reveal a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, agricultural livelihood, and a growing interest in agro-ecotourism, interspersed with real challenges and nuanced social dynamics.

In Nishangram, the Garo community, predominantly Christian with a language mix of Garo and limited Assamese and English, heavily relies on agriculture, livestock, and fisheries as their main livelihoods. The women's focus group discussion highlighted not only their existing engagement in farming activities such as cultivation of turmeric, rice, millet, and rosella etc. but also their reservations and hopes for tourism development. The women expressed an eagerness to contribute to the agro-ecotourism initiative, particularly through home-stays and cultural exchange opportunities, but their willingness depends on improvements in amenities, chiefly sanitation and accommodation facilities. They produce traditional cuisine- such as dry fish dishes, wet bamboo shoot, and meat preparations- and craft items like fishing tools and hand fans, offering authentic cultural experiences for tourists.



Pic 11 & 12. ASRLM homestay in Nishangram

Community land usage also emerged as a collective resource, with 1 bigha shared within 12 families for produce cultivation sold in nearby markets. However, the management of communal resources, including fisheries where competitive fishing events occur, reflects a strong but informal social cohesion. The villagers organize community cleaning activities under village head directives, demonstrating a collective sense of responsibility despite challenges with waste disposal, which mostly involves burning it.



Pic. 13. Waste burning in Nishangram



Pic. 14. Farmlands in Nishangram

Significant cultural events- festivals like Ongala in November and church concerts in December- offer inherent tourism potential yet remain underleveraged. The limited influx of tourists tends to be transient, with visitors often arriving and leaving the same day due to lack of lodging infrastructure or local reluctance to accommodate overnight stays. Notably, existing home-stays, including some supported by state schemes, are independently operated with mixed success. The village head and Block Project Manager acknowledge the community's hesitance, attributing it partly to privacy concerns and cultural conservatism.

In the villages of Goalpara and Bongaigaon, the community's perspectives echo similar themes of agricultural livelihood combined with aspirations for tourism development. The Panchayat leaders highlight opportunities for trekking, fisheries, and natural farming, however, persistent infrastructure deficits-poor roads, lack of sanitation services, and insufficient institutional support-remain significant constraints. Women's groups in Sankarghola are increasingly active, engaging in lemon cultivation, trained in soap and candle making, and other value-added products, although challenges in forming cohesive working groups limit collective progress and need for market linkages persists.

The areas engaged in natural farming, yet the progression from subsistence to market-oriented agriculture requires support in certification, market linkages, and technical guidance. Villagers are grateful for training efforts by KVK and SeSTA and express the need for more context-sensitive, language-appropriate capacity-building programs.

Youth migration is a recurring issue that affects the demographic base of farming and potential tourism workforce. Many young people seek employment outside the villages, further emphasizing the need for locally viable livelihood options to stem rural exodus. Some stakeholder meetings underlined the positive role Agro-ecotourism can play in providing meaningful employment and economic diversification through various trainings for bird watch, trek guide, boating, hospitality etc.

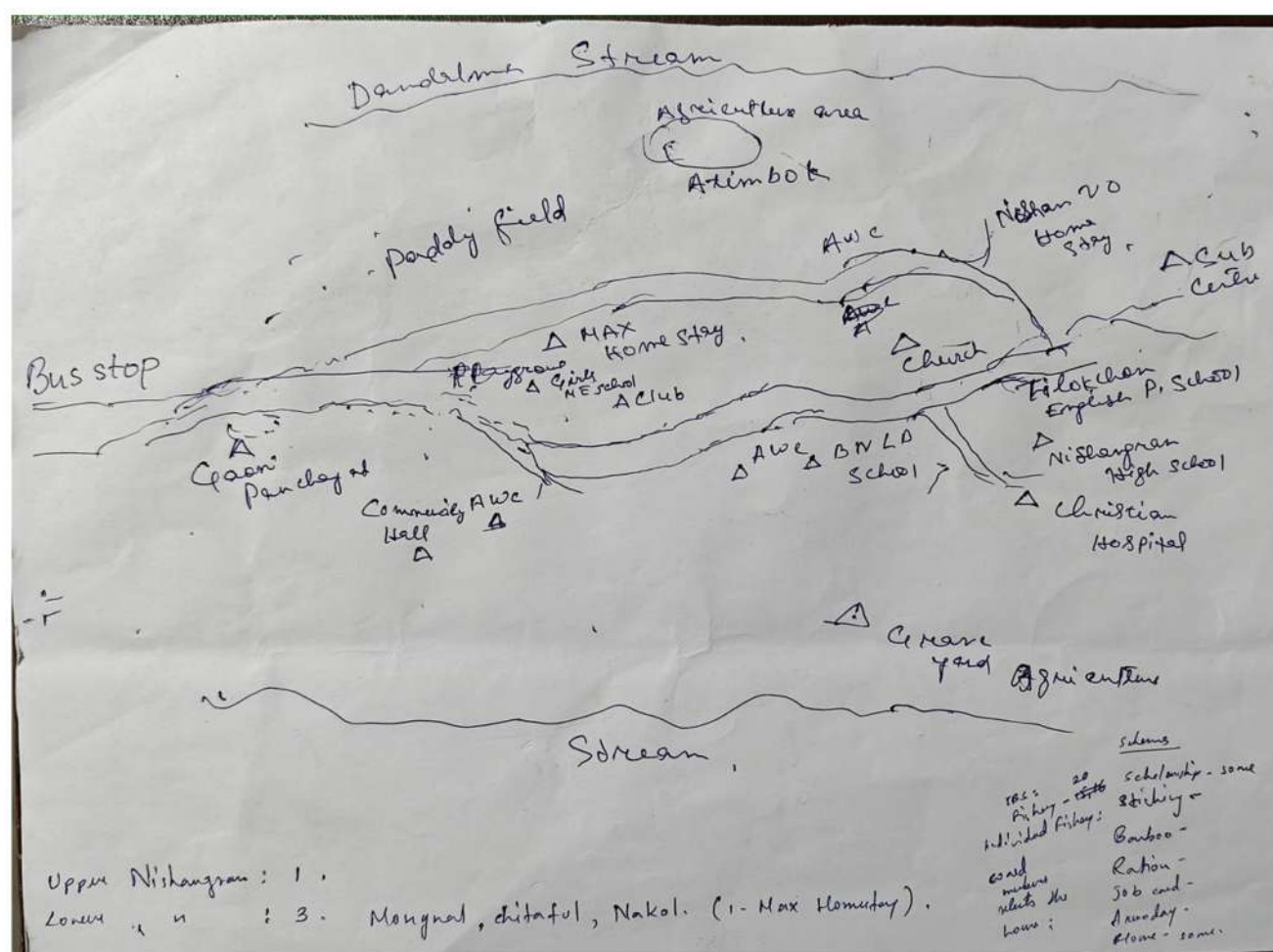
Throughout FGDs and interviews, women emerged as pivotal actors in community development and agro-ecotourism. Initiatives such as the Green Cafe in Goalpara symbolize successful models of women-led enterprises that combine natural produce marketing with hospitality services. Despite socio-cultural constraints, many women show enthusiasm toward home-stay management and local craft promotion if adequately supported.

The community in Nishangram too showed concerns around the issues of funding, administrative bureaucracy, and lack of leadership as they need someone to take their lead. Villagers often cited past efforts stalled by changes in government personnel or lack of follow-through. While there have been attempts to initiate projects like pond development for boating or fishing festivals, these often lose momentum without sustained community engagement and institutional support.

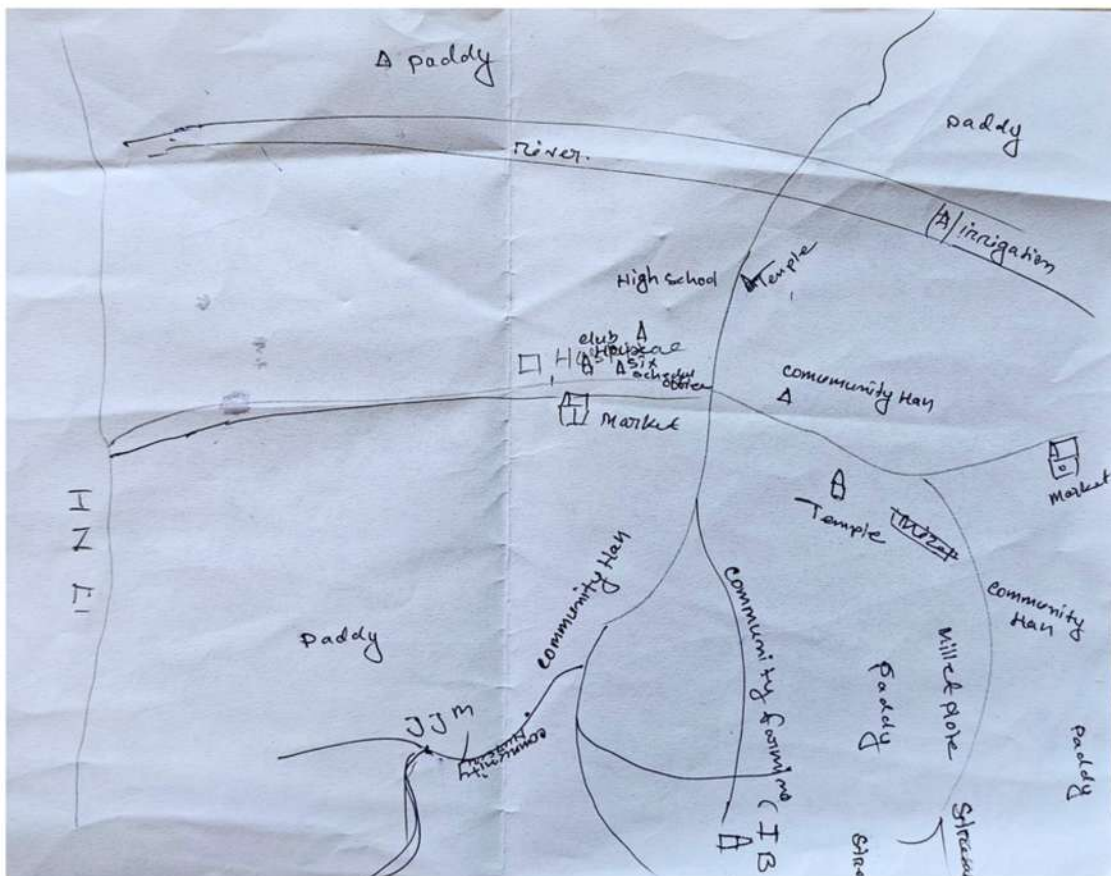
In summary, community discussions illuminate a foundation of rich heritage, natural resources, collective spirit, and emerging interest in agro-ecotourism. However, the path forward requires addressing infrastructure gaps, building capacity, fostering trust and cooperation among residents, and ensuring continued institutional support that respects local norms and aspirations.

7.5.2 Data from the skill map, resource map, home-stay scope, birdwatching, natural farming, space for interventions, livelihood scope, natural resources, waste management etc.

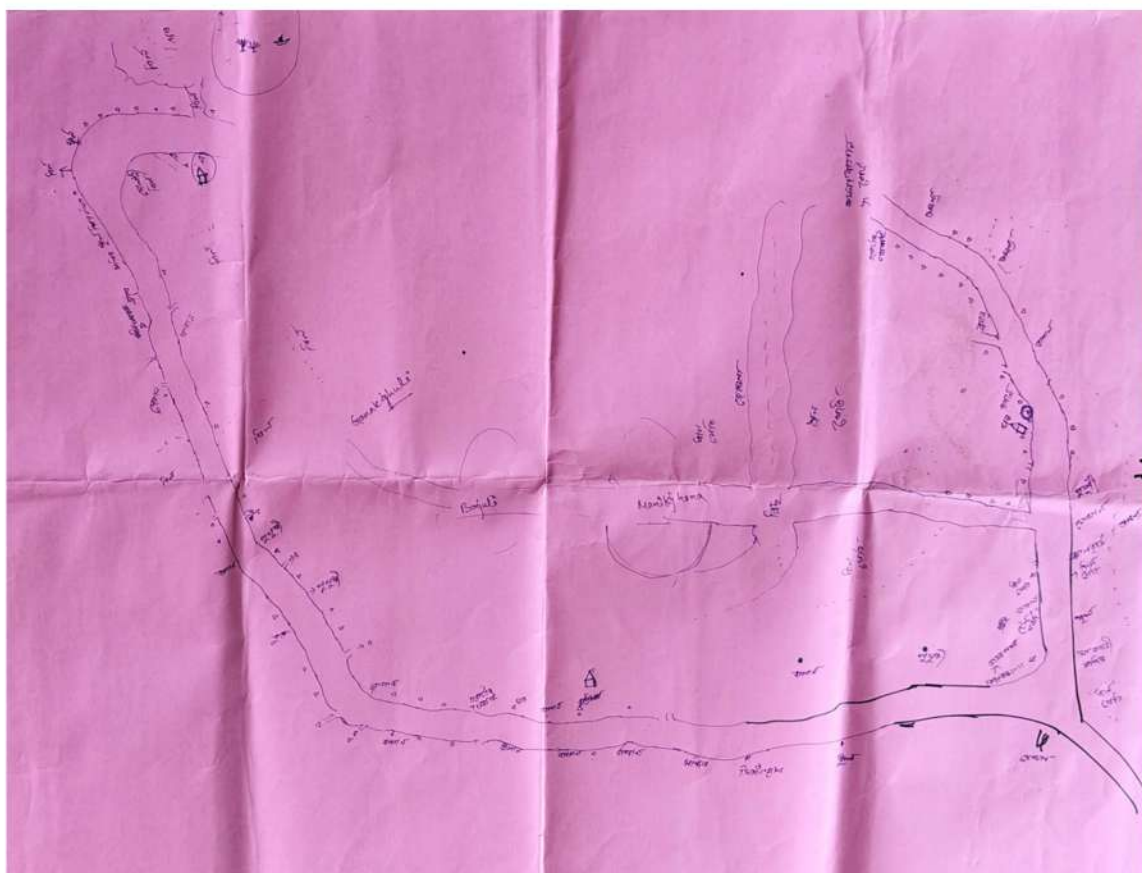
Photos of resource maps:



Pic. 15. Nishangram



Pic. 16. Sutki



Pic. 17. Sankarghola

Case story

Mrs. Pramila Sangma from Nishangram, Damra has been Running the Max Homestay for round two years now. She has 3-4 rooms with attached washrooms. At first, she was taking care of the homestay that was facilitated by the ASRLM's (Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission) side and after few months, she started her own homestay with the help of her daughter and son in-law. Now, during the tourist season, she earns around Rs. 30,000/- per month



Mrs. Pramila Sangma



Pic. 18



Pic. 19



Pic. 20

8. Stakeholder's Inputs

Stakeholders from panchayat offices, government departments (agriculture, fisheries, and forestry), technical institutions like Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), and ASRLM provided critical insights into the operational and strategic landscape for agro-ecotourism development. The Panchayat Secretaries across villages uniformly reported constraints related to funding and bureaucratic delays that limit development activities and also how their plans stay unapproved. Funds previously available for village development has decreased, and proposed tourism or livelihood enhancement projects face difficulties in approval or implementation. Despite newer infrastructure setups like vermicompost pits and material collection facilities, lack of community awareness and training delays their operationalization.

Officials emphasized their capacity limitations, with many staff members managing multiple portfolios, thereby diluting focus on tourism-specific initiatives. They recognized the growing importance of agro-ecotourism but lamented the absence of dedicated resources or programmatic prioritization. The need to mobilize select, willing community members rather than general assemblies was suggested to overcome resistance and inertia.



Pic. 21. Meeting with the stakeholders



Pic. 22. Visiting the nearby village

Krishi Vigyan Kendras representatives highlighted their contribution in providing training on natural farming, nursery management, and organic cultivation, albeit hampered by language barriers and intermittent engagement. Their willingness to continue and expand technical support was clear, contingent on formal acknowledgment and improved community receptivity. In Goalpara (Nishangram), the Agriculture Department in initiating a Demonstration Farm where students, farmers can visit and gain knowledge, also to cultivate in future if interested.

The Block Project Managers (BPMs) in both areas mentioned that homestay initiatives, especially those led by Self-Help Groups (SHGs), have gained traction but require sustained capacity building. They mentioned government plans for tourism-focused training, though these were often deferred. The role of women's groups in homestay management and agro-enterprises was underlined as vital but constrained by limited market access and infrastructural challenges such as poor sanitation and accommodation facilities. Language barriers between training providers and community members emerged as a significant challenge.

Forest Department officials elaborated on complementary eco-tourism efforts such as the Green

Café- women-run retail enterprises showcasing local organic produce- and the Pancharatna Eco Camp providing youth employment.

Plans for community-based tourism activities near wetlands (Urpada Beel) include bird-watching centers, boating facilities, and experiential homestays reflecting tribal lifestyles. Stakeholders also called attention to the environmental context, especially issues posed by rubber plantations that, while lucrative, present long-term ecological risks. They advocated for diversification through natural farming and agro-ecotourism as opportunities to sustain livelihoods and preserve biodiversity but also mentioned about the challenges to aware people against it as it is a good income source for the villagers.

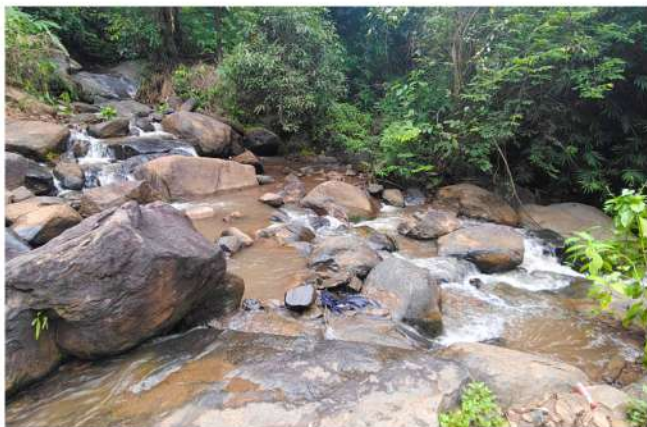
Representatives from NABARD and other development banks emphasized their role in financing value-added agricultural and tourism enterprises but underscored the necessity of community readiness and organized producer groups to effectively utilize such support. Government officers and experts recognized the fragmentation of efforts across departments and stressed the need for convergence platforms to integrate agriculture, tourism, forest conservation, and social welfare initiatives. They envisioned coordinated awareness programs, training sessions, and infrastructure upgrades to enable viable agro-ecotourism ventures.

In conclusion, stakeholders agree on the high potential of agro-ecotourism to spur rural development and environmental conservation but caution that success hinges on multi-sectoral collaboration, capacity enhancement, infrastructure development, and sustained community engagement, especially empowering women and youth.

9. Key Findings:

9.1 Rich Cultural and Natural Assets:

The villages possess vibrant cultural traditions, including unique festivals (Ongala, thanksgiving, church concerts), craft-making (hand fans, khaloi, winnowing fans), and distinct culinary heritage (dry fish, rosella with meat, bamboo shoot dishes, rice beer, Pithali). Agro-biodiversity is high, with farming practices encompassing turmeric, millet, sesame, lady finger, beans, maize, and livestock. Fisheries and natural farming are important livelihood streams. Community events, such as fishing competitions, showcase local engagement and hospitality.



Pic. 23. Waterfall site at Hatigao



Pic. 24. FGD in Sutki

9.2 Emerging Interest and Readiness for Agro-Ecotourism

Villagers show strong interest in participating in agro-ecotourism, particularly through developing and running homestays, offering local cuisine, and hosting cultural experiences. Women express willingness to host guests, especially where their spouses are supportive; women-led initiatives like the Green Cafe exemplify successful models. The concept of “live a life of a Garo tribe” and “live the life of a forester for a day” planned by the forest department to be initiated are innovative, experience-based tourism ideas discussed. There is enthusiasm for hands-on activities such as bird-watching, boat rides, farming demonstrations, cycling, and skill exchange programs. There also can be harvest and cultivation festivals arranged where tourist can come and stay with the villagers and also participate with the farming activities, play mud games and have an essence of the village life. Interest often depends on availability of infrastructure and community support.

Some pictures of the Green café, Goalpara (Pic 25,26,27):



9.3 Challenges: Infrastructure, Funding, and Social Barriers

Persistent funding shortages and bureaucratic hurdles impede infrastructure upgrades-including roads, sanitation, and home-stay facilities. Existing government schemes and proposed interventions are slow to materialize, and local officials report lack of monetary support from higher authorities. There is a reluctance to host tourists within family homes that is common, rooted in privacy concerns, sanitation issues, and apprehensions about capacity. Training and technical guidance are requested but not always accessible due to staff shortages and language barriers.

SHGs are widely present but collective activity is limited; most prefer working individually, apart from coordinating on loans. Youth migration is a notable trend, reducing the workforce available for agro-ecotourism, with some groups actively seeking to engage returned youth via new livelihood strategies.

9.4 Strengths, Innovation, and Community Leadership

Existing successful initiatives, such as privately-owned homestays and the women-managed Green Café (Goalpara), demonstrate both the sustainability and income potential of agro-ecotourism models. These efforts provide employment, enhance visibility for local products, and support skill development.

9.4.1 Training received from organizations (KVK, VO, Producer Groups, Eco Tourism experts) is recognized as valuable- covering areas like homestay management, nursery operation, mushroom cultivation, and organic farming. Community cleaning efforts and participatory activities show capacity for self-organization.

9.4.2 Leadership within the community varies in strength but remains a vital catalyst for progress; energetic individuals- such as former Block Project Managers and local entrepreneurs- have been instrumental in driving initiatives like village beautification, pond development, and festival organization. However, these promising efforts frequently lose momentum whenever a more consistent and sustained leadership presence is lacking.

9.5 Sustainable Development Linkages

9.5.1 The role of rubber plantations illustrates the conflict between short-term economic gains and long-term ecological sustainability. Stakeholders and scientists highlight risks to biodiversity and soil health, advocating for diversified farming and conservation-based tourism.

9.5.2 Stakeholder consultations affirm the need for convergence among agriculture, forest, tourism, and social welfare departments to effectively address village priorities and promote resilience through alternative livelihoods and skill upgrades.

9.5.3 The Joint Forest Management Committee's (JFMC) activities, such as the Green Café, Pancharatna Eco Resort and plans for interpretive centers near Urpada Beel, demonstrate potential for ecotourism to reduce environmental pressure and improve local income.

9.6 Market Opportunities and Skills

In this study, it has come out that the villages offer various agricultural techniques, combined with traditional knowledge and artisanal products, equip them to capitalize on rising segments of rural, farm-based, and environmentally concerned tourism.

Agro-ecotourism ventures near and at the study areas can focus on organic turmeric, rice, and lemon farming, as well as fisheries and handicrafts, in addition to birding and rural homestays. Integration of nature-based activities, such as boat excursions, fishing festivals, trekking, and bird-watching, broadens the tourism portfolio.

Following are the sector wise deviation for the activities that can be carried out:

9.6.1 Agricultural Landscapes and Practices

The village has a rich variety of agricultural practices rooted in local knowledge systems that are focused under this study. Visitors can find fisheries and integrated farming systems in the villages. These experiences will bring tourists closer to the rhythms of rural life- giving them the chance to plant, harvest, or learn how traditional farming coexists with ecological balance. Demonstrations on vermicomposting, nursery management, and agro-processing can further engage visitors while promoting sustainability through hands-on interaction.

9.6.2 Local Goods and Artisan Skills

The villagers are equipped with various skills through which the groups can display and sell handloom weaves, bamboo crafts, organic spice packs, and natural lemon-based products like soaps and candles. Tourists can observe how these are made, gaining a deeper appreciation for traditional techniques while contributing to local economies through responsible purchases and also get involved with the skill exchange where they can learn and also teach something to the villagers, or can learn the skills while staying in the village and exploring the area.

Establishments in Goalpara such as women-led eco-café or farm retail outlets can serve as venues for this direct exchange between producers and consumers and can also be initiated in the selected area Bongaigaon where the women groups can get involved.



Pic. 28. Local Bamboo Craft



Pic. 29. Community Fishery



Pic. 30. Boating at Dolani Beel

9.6.3 Traditional Foods and Culinary Experiences

Food remains a powerful medium through which visitors connect to the environment and culture and one of the main attractions for the tourists as well. Agro-ecotourism sites can organize farm-to-table experiences where tourists help prepare local delicacies using freshly harvested ingredients. Seasonal dishes highlighting local rice varieties, organic vegetables, mushrooms, fish, and herbs immerse guests in everyday agrarian culture. Culinary demonstrations or shared meals with farm families will allow travelers to experience how traditional food habits support biodiversity and community well-being.

A gist of local food platters (Pic 31,32):



9.6.4 Festivals and Community Events, Farm and Nature-based Activities

Local festivals such as harvest celebrations, fishing/ angling festivals in fisheries, or planting festivals can become integral attractions. These lively events reflect gratitude to nature and honor the agricultural cycle. Guests may join in folk music, dance, and village fairs, strengthening their emotional connection with the people and ecology of the region. Such cultural immersion fosters respect for local traditions and helps preserve intangible heritage by turning them into participatory learning experiences.

Beyond agriculture, visitors can experience nature through bird-watching, trekking trails, and boat rides along village rivers and wetlands. Activities like catch-and-release fishing, tree planting, or guided biodiversity walks create awareness of the interconnectedness between farming, water, and wildlife. Involving tourists in seasonal agricultural or conservation efforts turns recreation into education, encouraging stewardship of natural resources. For these activities to be started the interested villagers need to be trained upon and these initiatives can be taken up by the forest department in the Bongaigaon area like it was done in Goalpara area by the department.

9.6.5 Capacity Building and Inclusive Participation

Building local capacity involves equipping people with the technical and entrepreneurial know-how required to manage and benefit from agro-ecotourism ventures. Farmers and artisans can be trained in organic farming, value addition, and marketing of farm produce such as turmeric, lemons, and rice, while also trying to cultivate the maize and learning to maintain ecological integrity through responsible land use. Similarly, specialized sessions on eco-hospitality, hygiene standards, homestay management, guest handling, and culinary preparation enable households to extend authentic and comfortable experiences to visitors. Such training can be facilitated by Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), SeSTA through external resource persons, and tourism departments, focusing not only on skill enhancement but also on fostering confidence and ownership among rural participants.

In this endeavor, women and young people are the most important human resources. Women's self-help organizations are already involved in a variety of livelihood pursuits, including as food production, handicrafts, and spice processing etc., and they can readily transfer these abilities into tourism-related businesses like neighborhood cafés, agri-retail establishments, or handicraft-based enterprises. Women can take up the administrative positions in agro-tourism cooperatives with the support of committed mentorship programs and leadership courses, guaranteeing parity in benefits and voice. Simultaneously, young people's involvement in digital marketing, boating, and nature guiding, photography, and eco-tour businesses links conventional methods with contemporary business. Young people act as innovators who boost local economies and communal pride when they are given fulfilling roles in their villages. The community halls or a part of it can be used as a tourist information centre in suggestion with the village head and the people.



Pic. 33. Community Halls in Sankarghola that can be turned into tourist information centre

Value-added products such as organic spices, handloom and bamboo crafts, lemon-based products (soap and candles), and traditional culinary items can be marketed through both local markets and specialty eco-tourism retail shops such as the women-run Green Cafe. These channels give farmers and craftspeople direct access to consumers, which boosts profitability and market connections.

Traditional farming expertise, natural resource management, animal husbandry, fishery practices, and artisan crafts form an exceptional skill base, with further development, can strengthen agro-ecotourism's sustainability and profitability. With regular training programs conducted by institutions like KVK, NGOs, etc and continued efforts of the same will enhance knowledge of people on organic farming, nursery management, vermicomposting, and agro-processing.

Hospitality skills, such as home-stay management, local guide services, food (local cuisine) preparation, and customer engagement-are emerging areas with strong potential. However, gaps remain particularly in formal training related to quality standards, hygiene, language proficiency, and tour coordination. Training efforts that address these deficits, delivered in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways, are essential.

Women and youth represent a vital resource pool. Women's groups have shown interest and are equipped to take lead in managing Agro-retail outlets, homestays, and craft production. Youth, if adequately engaged and provided with skill-building opportunities, can reverse migration trends and energize the tourism economy.

10. Insights and Analysis

Certain community reluctance, coordination failures, language barriers, and tendency to favor individual over collective enterprise persist as key gaps. Unavailability of rooms, road, water and sanitation conditions inhibit tourism, and schemes often bypass those most in need due to lack of proactive outreach or leadership.

There is a need for institutional support to help villagers overcome the risks linked to agriculture and to re-activate SHGs and local federations for group-based tourism management.

Villages display readiness and interest in agro-ecotourism but face challenges relating to funding, infrastructure, and capacity. Local produce, festivals, cleanliness provides a strong foundation.

Rural agro-ecotourism potential in Western Assam is strong but unevenly realised. The study areas combine rich agro-ecological assets, wetlands, and tribal cultural heritage with emerging community initiatives, yet face persistent infrastructural, institutional, and market barriers that currently limit scale and sustainability.

10.1 Community readiness: Across Sutki, Hatigaon, Nishangram and the Tamranga&Doloni Beel cluster, communities show clear willingness to engage with agro-ecotourism, especially through homestays, guided nature walks, community fisheries, and sale of local produce. Women's groups, SHGs and youth collectives are already experimenting with small enterprises such as cafés, homestays and organic marketing, suggesting that social capital and leadership for tourism are present. However, readiness is uneven: while Nishangram and Hatigaon are relatively more exposed to visitors and natural farming initiatives, villages like Sutki and Sankarghola remain cautious due to limited information, perceived risks and lack of demonstration models.

10.2 Infrastructure and policy gaps: Basic infrastructure- roads, way finding, sanitation, waste management, digital connectivity, and reliable power- remains inadequate around many key sites and directly constrains the type and volume of tourism that communities can realistically host. Public investments in approach roads, beel embankments and some tourism infrastructure have begun, but these efforts are fragmented and poorly coordinated with community priorities. At the policy level, existing schemes (ASRLM, KVK, tourism and forest department programmes) touch the villages in isolation rather than through a convergent agro-ecotourism plan, which results in duplication in some areas and complete gaps in others such as last mile transport, safety standards and wetland regulation.

10.3 Environmental and social considerations: The ecological sensitivity of wetlands and surrounding forests requires that any tourism growth be tightly regulated to avoid habitat degradation, waste accumulation and cultural commodification. Evidence of rubber expansion, changing crop patterns and pressure on fisheries suggests that tourism could either exacerbate ecological stress or provide incentives for conservation, depending on how it is designed. Socially, women's growing role in homestays and agro-processing creates pathways for empowerment, yet also increases their workload and exposure to safety risks if not backed by supportive norms, infrastructure and safeguards. Inclusive planning that centres women, youth and marginalised households will be crucial to prevent few centric captures of benefits.

10.4 Strategic implications: Taken together, the findings indicate that Western Assam is at an inflection point: communities and institutions have initiated promising experiments, but the transition from isolated projects to an integrated agro-ecotourism ecosystem has not yet occurred. Strategic interventions need to focus on three fronts, strengthening community capacities and governance (especially women-led platforms), closing critical infrastructure and policy gaps through convergence of existing schemes, and building market linkages that reward ecological stewardship. If these elements are aligned, the study areas can serve as demonstration sites where agro-ecotourism simultaneously enhances rural incomes, reinforces cultural identity, and safeguards wetland and hill ecosystems.

11.Recommendations and Way Forward

The development of agro-ecotourism in the study villages demands a structured set of recommendations that align short-term actions with a longer vision for sustainable rural transformation. Short-term initiatives should focus on setting up seminars for basic orientation and community awareness to educate local stakeholders and villages about the potential of eco-friendly practices and agro-ecotourism.

Community mapping of agricultural and cultural resources, homestay building, renovations, sanitation, water supply and organic farming pilot projects are examples of immediate measures.

In addition to creating early economic gains and laying the foundation for more institutionalized growth, these initiatives would aid in igniting local interest. Long-term plans should concentrate on creating all-encompassing agro-ecotourism clusters that combine the environment, culture, and agriculture into a seamless whole. The establishment of farmer cooperatives, eco-tourism management committees, and partnerships with academic and tourism institutions by bringing students into the villages for exposure or other projects can ensure sustained growth and promotion, improved governance, and standardized tourism offerings that reflect authenticity and quality.

Achieving these objectives will mostly depend on efficient training and ongoing capacity building but also the interest of the community. Identifying specific skill gaps among various community sectors, such as farmers, women entrepreneurs, youth tour guides, and artisans, should be the first step in creating customized training programs that capitalize on current capabilities. Technical training on organic cultivation, fishery management, hospitality, sanitation and post-harvest processing should go hand in hand with hospitality and communication training. Similarly, sessions on digital marketing, visitor management, and participatory conservation will prepare communities to engage with modern tourism markets while preserving their rural ethos. Training institutions such as Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), Agriculture, tourism, rural development agencies, and local NGOs can serve as facilitators, creating an ecosystem of continuous learning through exposure visits, workshops, and farmer field schools. The aim should not only be technical proficiency but also nurturing leadership, entrepreneurial confidence, and collective ownership among participants, ensuring that every stakeholder- from a farmer to a homestay owner- becomes an active contributor to the agro-ecotourism value chain.

Enabling policy linkages and mobilizing resources are equally vital to sustain these efforts beyond the project horizon. Agro-ecotourism can align with existing government schemes/ missions and state livelihood missions that promote women-led enterprises. Formal partnerships with departments like Rural Development, Handicrafts, and Horticulture can unlock technical, infrastructural, and marketing support. Financial institutions and CSR initiatives can also be tapped to fund renewable energy for homestays, eco-friendly infrastructure, and brand development through micro-grants or impact investments. Mobilizing convergence between government programs, private sector players, and civil society organizations will create an enabling resource network where policy, practice, and community drive work together. When coordinated effectively, these recommendations ensure that agro-ecotourism evolves as a people-centered enterprise- anchored in local capacity, supported by policy frameworks, and sustained by collective stewardship of the environment and culture.

To operationalise these findings, roles and responsibilities need clearer alignment with existing schemes and institutions. The Tourism Department can lead on destination branding, infrastructure at key sites, and basic standards for homestays and guides. ASRLM and SHG federations are well placed to organise women's groups, manage community-run homestays and cafés, and channel livelihood and skills programmes such as DDU-GKY and NRLM training into tourism-related enterprises. KVK and the Agriculture Department can anchor natural farming demonstrations, farm-based experiences, and value-addition training that link directly to tourist demand.

Forest and Wetlands authorities should frame and enforce ecological safeguards, including visitor caps, waste norms, and protection of critical habitats around beels and forests. Panchayats and village councils can coordinate local planning, ensure that benefits are fairly shared, and mediate between community priorities and departmental plans. NGOs and academic institutions can support facilitation, capacity building, and monitoring, ensuring that agro-ecotourism models remain inclusive and ecologically grounded.

Some existing schemes for tourism development, homestays & craft promotion:

1. **“Aamaar Aalohi” Rural Homestay Scheme** : Aamaar Aalohi’ - Rural Homestay Scheme is framed by the Tourism Department, Govt. of Assam, with the objectives of giving a new dimension and thrust to the Rural Homestay Facilities in the State of Assam and creation of self-employment opportunities for educated youths in rural and semi-urban areas of tourism potential and importance.

[Assam Tourism Development Corporation. (2022). Aamaar Aalohi Homestay Scheme 2022–23: Application and guidelines. Government of Assam, Department of Tourism. https://tourismcorporation.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/atdc_webcomindia_org_oid_4/portlet/level_1/files/amar_alohi_form.pdf]

2. **Assam-specific bamboo and craft schemes**

a. Assam Bamboo & Cane Policy, 2019 (State Bamboo Development Agency / State Bamboo Mission): Provides subsidies under National Bamboo Mission for nurseries, plantations, treatment and processing units, and marketing infrastructure.

[State Bamboo Development Agency, Assam. (n.d.). Policy incentives. Government of Assam. <https://sbda.assam.gov.in/portlets/policy-incentives>]

3. **National Bamboo Mission (NBM)**: Offers credit-linked back-ended subsidies for plantations, processing units, market infrastructure and cluster development- useful if your cluster plans any bamboo-based processing or design centre.

[Foundation for MSME Clusters. (2022). Bamboo resource status & business opportunities in Assam. https://www.switch-asia.eu/site/assets/files/3663/bamboo_state_profile_-_assam-v2.pdf]

4. **PM Vishwakarma Scheme (traditional artisans)**: PM Vishwakarma is a new scheme and envisages to provide end-to-end holistic support to the traditional artisans and craftspeople in scaling up of their conventional products and services.

12. Annexure

Field: Nishangram

FGD with the Women of Nishangram and Damra, met with the village head, explored the tourist spots, met with the BPM, visited the existing homestays.

Discussion through the FGD: The women from the village (around 10-12) were present in the FGD conducted to learn the possibilities of agro-ecotourism. The discussion brought forward the points on their agricultural & fishing practices, food habits, their perceptions on the tourism/ homestay and what they can contribute to the same. The village consists of Garo population and speaks Garo and English (very less Assamese) and are following Christianity. Their livelihood is based primarily on agriculture, livestock, poultry and minimal horticulture. The village has three existing homestays including one being provided from the ASRLM. Throughout the discussion, the villagers have shown their interest in initiating homestays in their area but depending on the availability of rooms and other amenities. Anyone visiting the village from outside needs to inform the village head, even the men who got married to other communities outside the village need to inform the VH to visit their home. This is for the security and safety of the villagers.

There is a community land of 1 bigha shared within 12 people of the village and they sell their produce in the nearby market. People do cultivation for Roselle, turmeric, Beans, Lady finger, Maize, millet (foxtail), sesame seeds etc. Their main cuisine includes dry fish, roselle with meat, wet bamboo shoot, small brinjal, other dishes from chicken, pork and beef. The community is involved in livestock and poultry. People have been provided training from the KVK on these. The people spoke about the tourists only visiting the village these days and then going back without staying. They have a hospital in the village where many people from other areas visit and then they stay in the Max homestay owned and run by a village woman, not in the homestay opened by the ASRLM. In the village, they have a grocery shop, vegetable cultivation and nursery etc. For the nursery also, they have received training from the KVK.



Pic. 34 & 35. FGD with the Women from Nishangram

For crafts, they make hand fans, khaloi (used for fishing), kula (a winnowing fan used for separating grains from chaff). Very few women from the villages do weaving, and like they mentioned, they prefer buying it from the market nowadays as the labour put into these isn't worth it.

In the village they have around 3 fisheries where they hold fishing competitions mostly in the months of January & February, and people from nearby villages participate. These fisheries are privately owned. They also do community cleaning when the VH urges them too, if anyone isn't willing to do it, they have to pay a minimal fine. Mostly, the wastes are burnt by the villagers.

They celebrate a festival called Ongala in the month of November. In the month of December, they have concerts under the church and outside church as well. They celebrate thanksgiving, good friday and during the autumn break, they have vacation bible school.

Laskopara: nearby village

2-3 people got training under VO and ran homestays. They also practice natural farming. Received CIF funding for Producer group in Integrated farming.

Panchayat Secretary: The secretary Mr. Barman mentioned they haven't done anything yet from their side for developing livelihood within the village. He mentioned that they have funding issues as the plans and fund requests haven't been approved yet, and the plans and initiatives for the village were sent to the higher authority, they denied it saying they have other things to do and these shall not be kept in the agenda. He says they used to get fundings of Rs. 30- 40 Lakhs per year for the village development earlier and it was before his joining, now he thinks he could have done a lot of work with that during that time. When asked about the plans on waste management and how he can support the village on the same, he mentioned they have constructed a dumping unit (vermicompost pit) for the wet waste and also a MCF (Material Collection Facility) has been developed but both of them aren't used till now nor the people are aware of it. They are yet to inaugurate it. The villagers aren't trained for the use of vermicompost pit yet as they are waiting for the support from the KVK.

The secretary mentioned that they don't do any community farming. Also, they have not been able to run the homestay opened by the ASRLM as well and opened their own homestay instead. The people from the village are very laid back in comparison to the people from the Rangsapara village where also the garo people are staying but have been very proactively maintaining the village and accepting tourists. Also, they do only rice cultivation. He mentioned that there have been few difficulties earlier, how they couldn't possibly work in the area even if it's urgent on Sundays. The villagers would come and threaten them to close the office.

Further, he added that they can provide support with the community hall and awareness programs when needed but won't be able to provide any monetary support. Even for the awareness programs or meetings, he suggested calling the identified selected people who are willing to host tourists etc. as he faced a lot of difficulties earlier to initiate various projects in the village due to unwillingness of the villagers.

Santosh Kumar Baishya, Principal scientist and head, KVK:

He mentions that they haven't initiated any activity in Nishangram yet directly but have been involved with the previous block officer Mr. Haloi who was actively leading the tourism and village development activities in Nishangram. He mentioned that after Mr. Haloi got transferred, there has been a gap. But many people have been participating from the villages Nishangram and Damra for the training provided by KVK on nursery and natural farming. In addition, they are developing an agro-ecology model farm for demonstration of crops for the farmers and school children of the villages.

Moreover, there has been a language barrier and that they don't understand properly what is being taught in the training as well. Convincing the villagers takes a lot of time. When asked if they would be willing to provide technical support, they are willing to but would need proper acknowledgement for the support provided by them. The rubber plantations have also been a barrier in convincing the villagers to do other crops as it gives them more income. But Mr. Baishya mentioned that the villagers aren't realising its long-term harm and effects, just thinking about the present.

BPM, Dudhnoi: He mentioned that there are around 12 homestays in Nishangram and Damra. 7 nos of homestays are run by the SHGs. Some training on homestay management etc were to be held by the state but has been postponed. There is no tourism office in Goalpara. Under the VO, the people who run the existing homestay have received the training. The people coming in the village have lessened compared to before. They mentioned that there were no homestays in the village earlier but when they saw the homestay made by ASRLM having tourists, the nearby people started opening their own homestays and earning money for their own. Also, the funding given was only for the homestay and nothing more could be done on it. Earlier there used to be national and state level seminars happening in the location, but now it has been discontinued. Villagers are hesitant to run the homestay provided by the ASRLM as they think they need to share the profit with the government but the BPM mentioned that they only need to put their logo and mention the initiative taken by them. They are planning to execute the same by mobilising people and when they agree, they will take the village head with them and initiate it properly with additional activities like cycling, boating etc. Moreover, they are willing to provide funding to the villagers in least interest, yet the villagers aren't ready, adding the challenge of proper translations as there is a language barrier.

Also, the staff members of the block office mentioned about the less staff and how they need to look around everything and it gets difficult to manage everything together.

The tourist season runs from October to March, mostly during the winter season. There are fewer tourists during rainy days. When asked about the waste management in the village, they mentioned that it will be the responsibility of the panchayat to initiate all that, but they haven't done anything under the existing schemes.

Village Head: The village head mentioned that the idea of promoting agro-ecotourism in the village is encouraged by his end but it depends on the people how they accept it. He said the villagers are very laid back and also mentioned how the earlier officer from the block initiated so much in the village but the moment he was transferred, things became slow and people lost interest eventually. Sometimes, the villagers will be ready to work on the idea proposed but eventually with time they slow down and don't show any enthusiasm. A few women in the discussion mentioned that if their husbands are supportive of the idea of tourism, they can work in a better way.

Pranita Sangma, Jibika sakhi: Spoke about Mr. Ajay Haloi, previous BPM, how he managed to gather the villagers and work for the beautification of the village. The villagers were ready to provide a piece of community land for developing a pond/ small lake where the previous BPM was planning to have boat rides and fishing festivals etc for the tourists. But then he was transferred and it couldn't be completed. The owner of the MAX homestay Mrs. Pramila earns around Rs. 30,000/- per month, and she runs it without any training and guidance. She mentioned that the villagers aren't very supportive of the idea of keeping guests in their house, rather they will keep them in separate properties. Previously, they have mapped the houses by walking through the village for potential homestays.

It has been observed that there are a lot of potentials in the village for tourism but it needs constant push from the department as well. The people have had enormous support from the earlier BPM but after his transfer, things are now laid back. The panchayat is not doing enough for the village giving reasons of lesser funding and plans getting rejected. The women also seem to lack confidence now than earlier.

For waste collection, a rikshaw was provided to the villagers which they needed to run through the village and collect the garbage. But as the panchayat office opens at 10 AM, the villagers find it difficult to adjust timings. They said the panchayat didn't do any work. They said people are more willing to work for the nurseries. KVK has provided training for mushrooms but not many people are doing it now. They don't need market linkages as they sell it within themselves only. The SHG women are very old and the bank hesitates to provide loans to them. The SHGs don't have any activity now. Upon asking about SHG schemes etc, she said SHG women aren't willing to work collectively and prefers working individually except for loans. The agriculture department has provided Gerbera flower saplings to the villagers which they grew and sold and earned a decent amount of money and it shows a scope for floriculture in the area. They don't do community farming. They say that there is no one to motivate the people or take a lead like before.

Field: Agia (Sutki)

Panchayat President: The panchayat president was newly elected and hence couldn't contribute to the discussions much but guided us through the various spots that can be explored by the tourists (local only). There are 135 families in the village out of which around 90-100 families are doing rubber cultivation. There is a hill called Dhumketu Hill and can be a scope for trekking. But they mentioned that these places aren't that appealing to attract tourists from outside nor are there proper roads. For the rubber plantation, they mentioned they can plant 100 plants in 1.5 bigha of land and upon maturity, they earn Rs. 170/- per plant, per day from it. They all have MGNREGA cards. There are 20-30 fisheries in the village and one community fishery in 1 bigha of land. There are 9 SHGs and they used to do weaving earlier but discontinued. Now, they provide loans. Under horticulture, they do cultivation for beans, lady finger, radish, cabbage, chilli etc for their personal use only. Villagers also have livestock and poultry. They have also received 15 pigs under the scheme for their SHGs.

Village head, Sutki- Dhananjay Rabha: He mentioned that he wants to develop the village for Agro-ecotourism inspired by Hatigaon village but they have funding issues. He hasn't thought of any plans yet but is ready to work for the awareness. Also mentioned how youth have migrated from the village for work and now farmers are getting lesser in number.

FGD with the FPO group of Sutki village: The men in the group mentioned that they weren't able to discuss the topic of natural farming and related activities to agro-ecotourism. In the previous meeting with these villagers, we proposed some ideas like promoting the Natural farming products, developing a farming school as they already teach the local people about the natural farming and this can be used to teach people from various parts of the country with some more training and refinement of the process. The group also consisted of the villages Goraimari and Kumarpara and they have 150 total members in their FPO. The natural farming products from Sutki will be displayed in the Green cafe for which the Green Cafe administration is launching spaces for it. The green cafe will buy their products and then display it at their own price. In the village, everyone does weave for their own use but not for sale. Upon being asked, the group mentioned that the women of the village need to be aware and confident enough to come out and take initiatives.

The villagers were asked what different food they have to offer to the tourists if they start coming, they mentioned that their cuisine includes a dish called Pithali that is prepared with Kola Khar (black Alkali), mustard and black gram. Other than these, they cook pork, snails, sour dishes, and other vegetables. Also, they prepare rice beer.

Alfaruque Hussain, BPM: The BPM said they are planning to start projects on Livelihood that will have Agriculture as a main focus and organic farming as well, it will also have livestock eventually. They are planning to create a Producer's group and local groups having women in those who will be doing organic farming, these groups will be supported till 3 years and then they have to continue on their own. The focus area will be in Sutki. Brinjal and Pineapple will be cultivated through these. The village has local groups and they are taking a target of 1600 saplings and 500 farmers to be doing cultivation and there will be 30-35 people per group. Also, the training is already provided to these groups and the process for making organic pits is completed. Upon being asked about any scope or plans regarding agro-ecotourism, he said they are planning to hold a stakeholder's meet where officials from CDE, KVK, Department of Agriculture, BDO, SRLM, fishery, handloom & textile etc have attended. The BPM mentioned that if Agro-ecotourism could be done in the village focusing on the rural homestay, they can also promote black rice, and items made from it. Moreover, few of the villagers have received training from Mr. Sameer Bordoloi on farming as well.

Mukesh Chandray, Tourism Officer, Under Forest Department-Goalpara: Mr Chandray under the guidance of M Tejas, DFO had initiated the Green Cafe and it is growing since. The Green cafe has women only staff and now they are planning to extend the same where they are creating a children's play area and a space for selling the natural farming produce from Sutki and Hatigaon village. This will follow the B2B model and the farmers will get their fair price for providing the produce and then it will be displayed under the tags of Green Cafe with the information of the farmer and place of produce. Their motive was to reduce people's dependency on the forest for livelihood, but they had to provide alternative livelihood to them in order to ask them to reduce forest dependency. Including the green cafe, they have other various activities planned under the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) throughout the nearby villages. Assam has some designated famous tourist spots like Kaziranga, Manas etc but through JFMC, they are trying to explore more. The JFMC was first initiated in West Bengal and slowly spread over many other states. These initiatives are carried out in the personal interest of the DFO as he is eager to develop the area. There are two concepts basically called Community Run Tourism (CRT) and Community Owned Tourism (COT), this initiative comes under CRT.

The green cafe has 26 women who run it and were trained for the same, also owned and profit shared by them. Their salary also depends on the income they are generating and it isn't fixed. The Pancharatna Eco camp is an initiative of the Forest Department providing livelihoods to the youth of the village as well. This can also stop migration as they will get income opportunities from this. Moreover, they are planning a few things near Urpada Beel as well, where they are doing surveys and about to start the tourist interpretation centre and training a few people for birdwatching (to be completed within 2026), along with which they have plans for boating (manual boat and life jackets), kids play area too. Anjana Dheer (marketing), Anirudh Chausi (Ecologist, Maharashtra), Ashwini Srinivas (Eco Tourism expert, Bangalore), Nahar (IIITM- Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management). In Surya Pahar, they have already capacitated 28 certified tourist guides through training. Moreover, in phase 2, they are planning for the homestays with the concept of "live a life of a Garo tribe" where people would come and experience the raw lifestyle of the tribe and

learn their culture. Also, in Lakhipur, where there is a lot of movement of animals, they are planning to “Live the life of a forester for a day”. These will be initiated with utmost care and protection and the person/ tourist would shadow a forester for 24 hours throughout their duties and everything after which they will stay overnight at a watch tower of the Forest Department in Ambari area. Near Urapad Beel, they are also planning to involve nearby people to keep the adjacent road as only walking track as intended before making it so that it will be easier to watch birds without creating any disturbances. Now the Forest Dept is slowly urging people and training them to take ownership of their place and try to protect the beel. Otherwise, if the Forest gets involved, it will lead to conflict as they will be forcing the people to do so but their motto is to carry such initiatives in a friendly way. Mr. Chandray appreciated the women folks working in the cafe and working in harmony in such a number.

Mr. Chandray also mentioned about skill exchange and staycations where people can go and stay for a month or so and work from there by paying for it. But, he said that these facilities are available easily for the wealthy people but for the middle-class people, it gets difficult to pay amounts and stay as they don't earn more, hence someone from such backgrounds can come and provide their skill in exchange of stay and food. Hence both parties will benefit from the same. Many people are approaching the Green Cafe for their community hall to hold meetings etc but its is only ongoing and yet to finish. The demand is still there. The training for hospitality and serving etc were given to the women by Chandray only and the training for nursery management were given by Prof. Dhruba Sarma of Daffodil College of Horticulture.

He talked about the concept of zero travel that trending these days and how people shouldn't support it as tourism is developed for the benefit of the community we are visiting and shall be an income source for them if the people start taking favours and resources for free from them, the community won't be able to grow and will face crisis.

They are also thinking of developing the Green Cafe concept in Kasumari and Damra.

FGD with the Women of Sankarghola, Bongaigaon:

The women from the village (around 12-15) were present in the FGD conducted to learn the possibilities of agro-ecotourism. The discussion brought forward the points on their agricultural & fishing practices, food habits, their perceptions on the tourism/ homestay and what they can contribute to the same. The village consists of Rabha population and some nearby villages have Garo population as well. They speak Rabha, Assamese, Garo. Their primary source of income is agriculture, livestock, poultry and rubber. The villagers, upon asking, showed interest in the idea of Agro ecotourism but were hesitant towards keeping the guests with them due to sanitation facilities. Throughout the discussion, the villagers have shown their interest in initiating homestays in their area but depending on the availability of rooms and other amenities. Some of them are already experienced with hosting guests from SeSTA who went for their Rural Stay Test and Village study etc, and also from other states who come there for birdwatching etc. They mentioned that with support with the sanitation facilities and hosting, they will be able to host guests or can move forward with the idea of homestay. There is a hesitation among people whether they will be able to provide the basic necessities to the guests or how will they cope with it. Moreover, the villagers have mentioned about the conditions of a few roads in the village that are in a very bad condition and aren't accessible during the rainy season. Many of the students have left the school due to the road conditions.

They said that it will be better if there are capacity building programs for tourist management and suggested that a tourism society be created for better functioning and management of the tourists. The tourism promotion can only be done when someone takes the lead/ responsibility and manages these things.



Pic. 36



Pic. 37

The villagers have participated in demonstration programs for Horticulture, maize cultivation. They have faced challenges in Piggery farming. Around 30 households have a lemon garden, the villagers have been trained for lemon cultivation and, making soap from lemon, candle making and are about to initiate areca leaf plates.

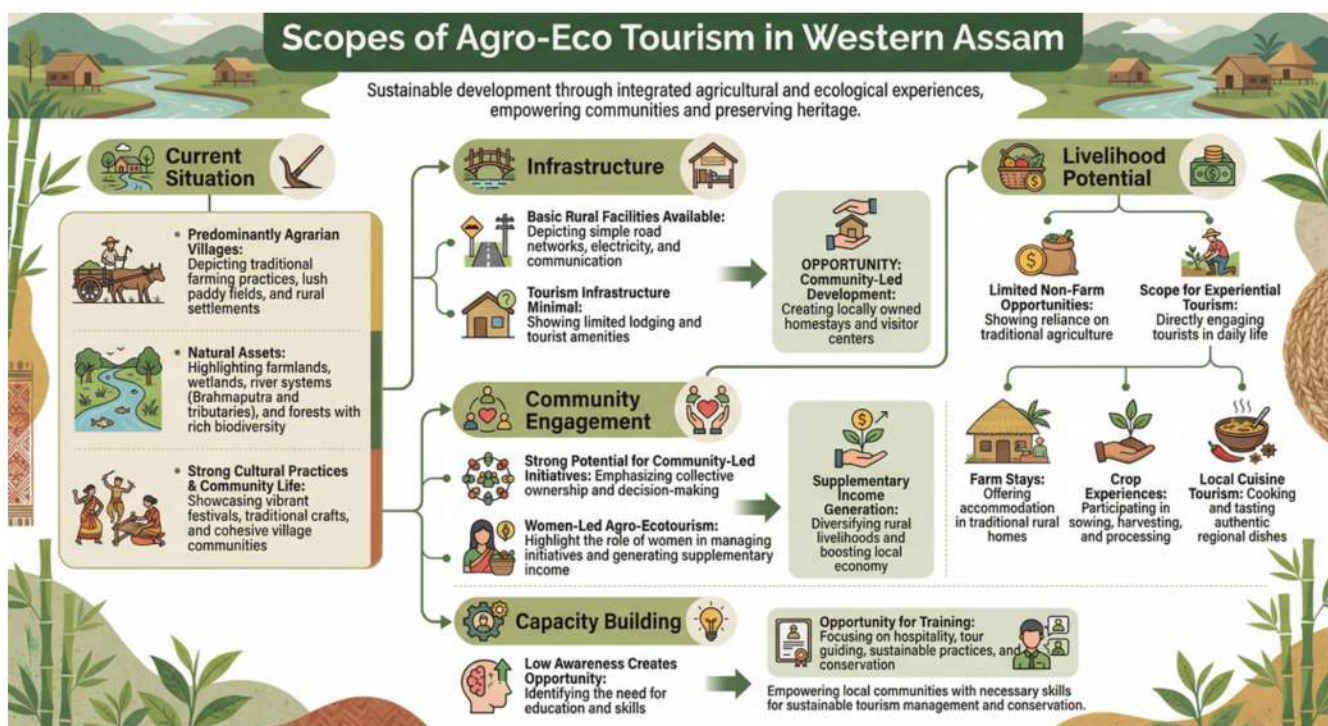
Dr. Gauranga Das, Subject matter specialist, KVK, Bongaigaon:

He mentioned that they aren't capacitated to carry out tourism related activities, if there was someone from home science in the office, they could have guided but they do not have staff at present. They do most of the demonstration programs for horticulture in areca nut, lemon etc in Sankarghola area. In collaboration with Nabard, the areca nut plates proposal was given and it was supposed to be done through the SeSTA and he insisted it be done in Sankarghola. The virangana suggested it to be fixed at Bongaigaon due to the costs etc, the plan and reports have been submitted to the NABARD and they are awaiting results.

Even though there are no particular projects for Agro-ecotourism at KVK, they can provide technical support for the programs.

He said the location is beautiful and there is scope for tourism, and these plans need to be proposed in BDC meetings so that they can provide the necessary support, and after those are discussed and initiated, the KVK's work comes where they provide the needed support to the villagers. Earlier, they have provided support in the Kayakuchi area for tourism in the first stage. He stated that the villagers in Sankarghola are already practicing natural farming, hence there isn't much to be taught. He suggested that lemon and turmeric produced in the village can be put as organic by applying for Organic certification, also before these the market shall be explored as on demand and price etc. People usually prefer the low-price commodity, but the organic products are more expensive but production is limited. The villagers have been trained for vermicompost and 4-5 compost nets are also provided to them, now it has to be started properly.

There is scope for maize cultivation in the village as well but people are not yet adapting the same, if they do it will generate a lot of profit for them. Mr. Das said that he will support the maize cultivation training in 2-3 hectares and seeds, they need these initiatives to be result oriented. ADO, Dept of Agriculture, Bongaigaon: Till now, they haven't thought of any initiatives for Agro-ecotourism and have only held awareness for not using pesticide and depending on the schemes, they aware people accordingly. Upon asking about upcoming schemes for organic farming, she mentioned that millet seeds were there but Sankarghola was not suitable for doing it hence they provided the same in other areas. There are various schemes that come for the tribal communities but it also depends on how interested the villagers are, they have to be confined within sally paddy and mustard. Moreover, the villagers don't show any interest in trying other crops and are only continuing what they were doing previously.



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