



Draft Tourism Policy, 2022
Tourism Department
Government of Meghalaya

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Introduction

Meghalaya, the abode of clouds, is known to be one of the richest biodiversity areas in the world. Meghalaya has a geographical area of 22,429 sq. km and a forest cover of about 76%. The current population is estimated to be about 38 lacs and the GSDP stands at approximately Rs. 40,000 Cr. The State has over 6,500 villages and is surrounded on the north by the State of Assam and on the south by Bangladesh. Several perennial rivers, lakes and waterfalls dot the landscape of this picturesque State. Meghalaya is also home to two national parks and five wildlife sanctuaries.

The famed monsoons, the rich traditional festivals, and the scenic terrain are just a few of the many features Meghalaya is famous for. It is endowed with lofty hill ranges with the interplay of lush green valleys, cascading rivers, sprawling water bodies, hot water springs, plunging waterfalls, caves, and living root bridges. Further, the current geological age that we live in is called 'The Meghalayan Age', the onset of which was marked by a mega-drought that crushed a number of civilizations worldwide. The evidence for the same was first recorded in the Mawmluh cave located in Sohra (Cherrapunjee) in Meghalaya. Meghalaya is also home to the cleanest villages in Asia - Mawlynlong, the cleanest river - Wah Umngot, the whistling village - Kongthong, the double-decker living root bridge - Nongriat and the tallest plunge waterfall in India - Nohkalikai falls.

Further, Meghalaya is blessed with rich cultural heritage and diversity. It is inhabited predominantly by the tribes of Khasis, the Garos, and the Jaintias. Shad Suk Mynsiem is a major event in the Khasi calendar, celebrated in the month of April as a mark of gratitude to nature and to celebrate the harvest and the sowing of new seeds. The Nongkrem dance festival is another major event of the Khasi calendar celebrated during Autumn at Smit in East Khasi Hills. Wangala is a harvest festival celebrated in the months between September and December across the Garo Hills. Behdienkhlam is the biggest festival of the Pnars and is celebrated in the month of July in the Jaintia hills.

Tourism and economy

The tourism sector plays a prominent role in providing livelihood opportunities to almost 50,000 people in the State. Further, it has been estimated that the sector contributes about 4.1%* to the State's GSDP.

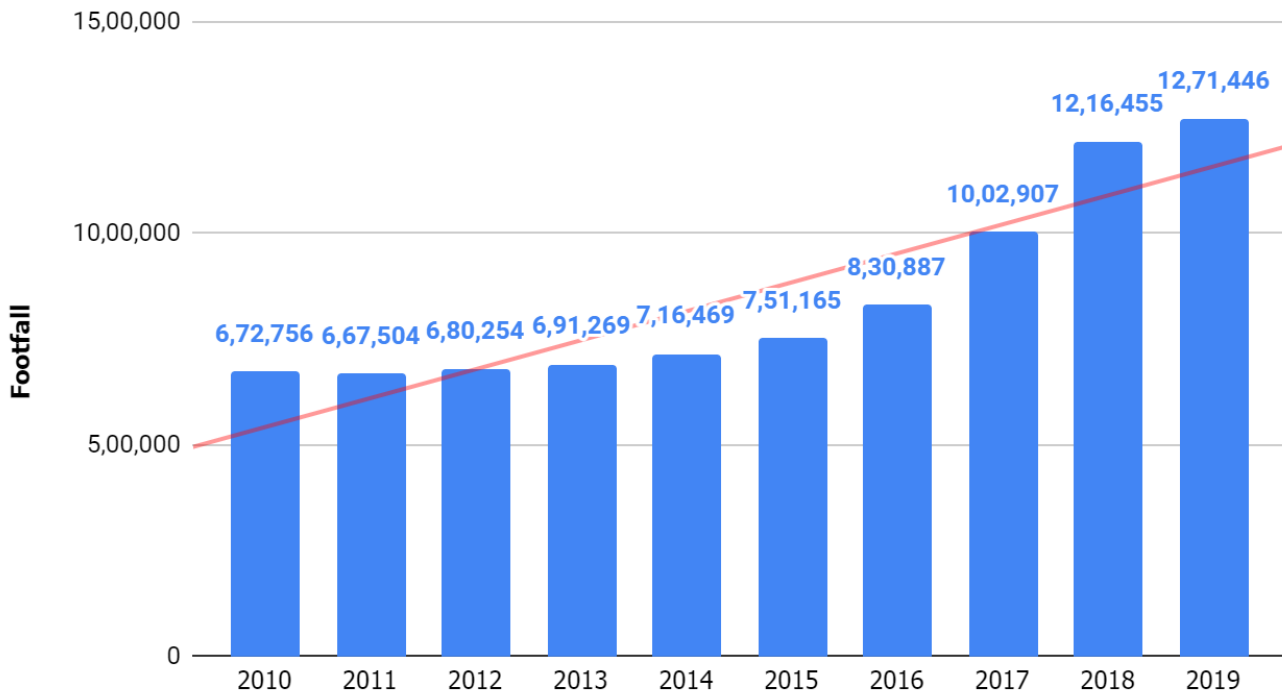
**Source : Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Meghalaya*

If appropriately developed, tourism can have several beneficial effects on the economy. It is a largely labor-intensive industry or service, and generates employment not only across sectors, but also across various skill levels, from the unskilled to the semi-trained, trained, highly skilled, and professionals. The multiplier effects of tourism on other sectors in terms of employment and income generation have been well documented. Apart from the direct employment and income effects, an expansion in tourism activity has indirect expansionary effects on several other sectors and industries, such as construction, transport, agriculture, food processing, handicrafts, and financial services.

Tourist footfall in Meghalaya

In 2019, the tourist footfall in the State stood at about 12.7 lakhs (including 25,000 foreigners). Among the Northeastern states, this is highest after the states Assam and Sikkim. The footfalls have grown steadily over the last decade and are once again witnessing a resurgence post the COVID pandemic. It is expected that the annual tourist footfall will cross 15 lakhs by 2024.

Tourism footfall - Meghalaya



Need for a Tourism Policy

The extant/ current tourism policy was formulated in 2011 and was published vide Government notification No. Tourism 74/2009/85 dated 1st February 2011. The previous policy, to a large extent has been successful in realizing its stated vision of positioning Meghalaya as a preferred tourist destination by taking advantage of its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty. Given that a decade has passed wherein tourism has evolved to be the mainstay of economic growth but also suffered immensely from a pandemic, it was felt necessary to have a comprehensive relook of the existing policy and come up with a revamped tourism policy.

Further, the State is celebrating its 50th year of Statehood and has set for itself the vision of being among the top 10 states within a decade. The new tourism policy has been designed in a manner that it will help create capacity and employment opportunities in the local economy and significantly contribute to the realization of this vision. Apart from evolving strategies to successfully attract a larger section of tourists of both domestic and foreign categories arriving in India, the State also needs to move swiftly to garner a larger section of tourists who are now looking for domestic destinations in place of international destinations post the

COVID pandemic. A concerted push to the tourism sector will also help strengthen and establish the brand identity of the State in national and global fora.

Vision statement

“To position Meghalaya as a preferred tourism destination and harness the tourism potential of the State, thus driving growth, generating employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for individuals and communities while keeping sustainability at the core.”

Current organizational setup for the promotion of tourism

Tourism is a multisectoral activity as it encompasses infrastructure creation, capacity building, engagement with the communities, promotion & marketing and attracting investments among others. The primary entity responsible for all these activities is the Tourism Department. The roles of the various organizations/ agencies involving in developing and promoting Tourism ecosystem are listed below:

a. Tourism Department/Directorate of Tourism

The Tourism department is responsible for formulation and overall implementation of the policies and programs of the State and Central Government in the Tourism sector.

The department implements various schemes for the growth and development of the tourism sector in the State and to benefit visiting tourists. The directorate undertakes various works including infrastructure development of tourist spots including accommodation units. It also undertakes promotional activities in the form of festivals, participation in fairs, exhibitions, marts, holding of awareness programs and publicity campaigns through advertisements in the print, electronic and social media.

b. Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC)

MTDC is a company fully owned by the State Government. It functions under the administrative control of the Department of Tourism, Government of Meghalaya. MTDC is engaged in the execution of projects including central sector schemes as well as the development of tourist infrastructure in the State. It is the owner of the flagship

Vivanta Meghalaya, Shillong, the Pinewood hotel, and the Orchid Lake resorts at Umiam and Mawkasiang.

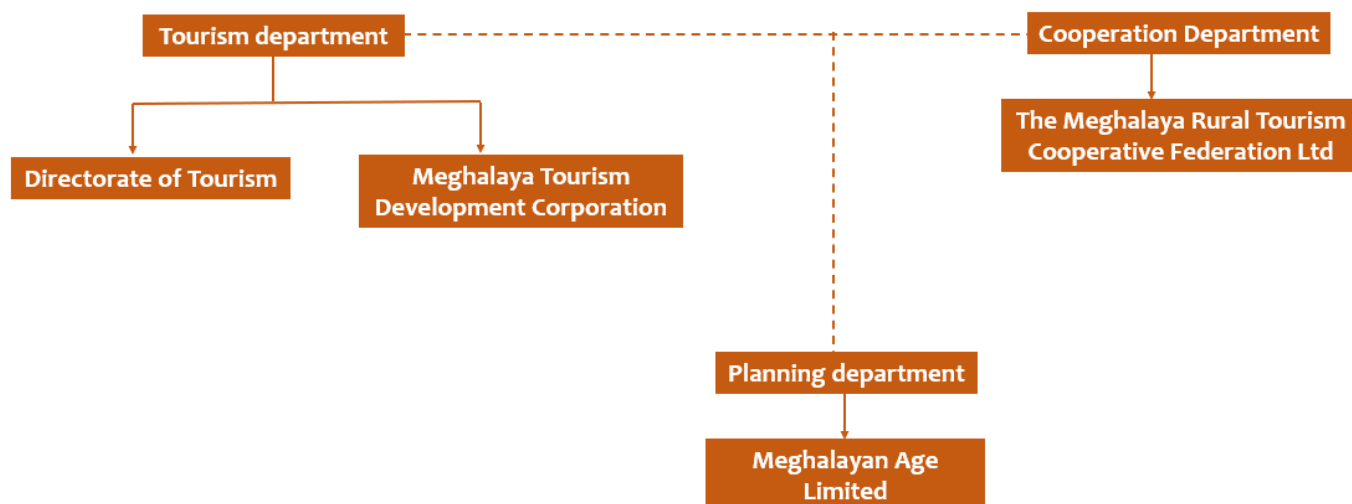
c. Meghalayan Age Limited (MAL)

MAL is a not-for-profit State Government company established under Section 2 (45) of the Companies Act, 2013 and has been incorporated under the Planning Department, Government of Meghalaya. It has been set up specifically for the implementation of externally aided projects, promotion of tourism and preservation of heritage in the State. The MAL organizes a series of festivals and events all through the year, undertakes branding activities, mobilizes investments for various projects, promotes entrepreneurship in the sector and facilitates private sector participation and growth.

While MTDC is the owner of all the flagship government's tourism assets, the core task of mobilizing investments - both public and private - and promoting tourism is being undertaken by MAL under the aegis of the Tourism and the Planning departments. MAL has been incorporated under the Planning Department because the Planning Department is the nodal department for the implementation of Externally Aided Projects (EAPs) and PPP projects in the State.

d. The Meghalaya Rural Tourism Cooperative Federation Limited

The Meghalaya Rural Tourism Cooperative Federation Limited was incorporated in 2013 under the Cooperation Department to provide financial support, guidance, technical skills, and management skills to all the affiliated Primary Cooperative Societies undertaking rural tourism projects. Through the cooperative, the Government supports the construction of accommodation units called "Travelers Nest" and other associated infrastructure such as markets across selected villages with high tourism potential. The ownership of these infrastructures lies with the local tourism cooperative societies, which are also in charge of the operations and maintenance of the properties. This model promotes cooperatives at the grassroots level and provides employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for its members comprising hundreds of young women and men. At present, there are 36 such projects which are all run and managed by Primary Cooperative Societies across the State.



Core Guiding Principles of the Tourism Policy

The core guiding principles have been envisioned as the set of foundational features that will help achieve the vision of this policy. They also lay down the overall framework which would allow the realization of the tourism potential, while achieving the developmental objectives of the State.

Core Guiding Principle 1 - Sustainable & Responsible Tourism

Meghalaya has a fragile ecosystem that needs careful planning and developmental strategy. The State is known to be a biodiversity hotspot, with a forest cover of over 75%. It is home to seven national parks/ reserves and several protected species. Meghalaya is also among the rainiest places on the planet. Further, the State's economy is closely tied to natural-resource-based and climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, water, and forestry. Encroachment of forest land for agricultural activity, overexploitation of biodiversity, unsustainable agricultural practices and non-scientific exploitation of resources may result in habitat degradation. Further, human settlements and unplanned infrastructure development have the potential to result in habitat loss and pollution.

The State Government recognizes that while growth would usher in considerable economic benefits, unplanned and unregulated growth could culminate in adverse environmental and socio-cultural effects. Such a start was already made under the ‘RESTART - Resilient and Sustainable Tourism’ initiative in September 2020 wherein the following three conscious principles were laid down-

- I. Carrying Capacity
- II. Right Pricing
- III. Zero Waste

Continuing with this, the government shall adopt a model of sustainable tourism as the preferred model for tourism development. The various elements for this approach can be -

a. Promoting high value - low volume tourism

This approach essentially means that avenues and tourism products are created for tourists with a high propensity to spend and stay in the State for longer durations. Theoretically, a higher number of tourists may not necessarily translate into increased spending in the State. However, a focus on high-value tourists can lead to more consumption in the State without a proportional adverse impact on the environment. Therefore, increasing footfall will no longer be the only metric for evaluating the growth of tourism in the State. It will also comprise the average amount spent by the tourists and the number of nights spent by them in the State.

b. Managing carrying capacity -

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines carrying capacity as “the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction.”

Given the above, the government shall carry out carrying capacity studies in eco-sensitive destinations to develop standards and norms for environmentally sustainable practices. Based on the finding of such studies, mechanisms shall be developed to ensure that planning is done keeping in mind the carrying capacity and sustainable practices in these destinations.

c. Encouraging low-impact tourism

The government shall encourage and promote tourism experiences which have a low impact on the environment and resources, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas. Tourism service providers, governmental agencies/authorities and local communities shall be sensitized to minimize the use of scarce and non-renewable resources in the development and operation of tourism facilities and services. Tourism projects aligned to benchmarks and standards that promote sustainability like the Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA), Indian Green Building Council (IGBC) or the Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India (STCI) guidelines shall receive special recognition and support from the government.

Further, efforts shall be made to regulate the usage of plastic and regulation of Internal Combustion Engines (ICE) in ecologically sensitive zones to lower pollution

d. Waste Management

Tourism operations produce large quantities of waste, some of which is toxic. Responsible waste management is not only about carefully planning the disposal of waste, but also about reducing and recycling waste that is generated, ensuring that the waste generators take responsibility for the waste on account of their activities.

The government shall take steps to collaborate with volunteers, experts, SHGs and NGOs to sensitize the communities and other stakeholders including departments like Urban Affairs and municipal authorities on waste management through cleanliness drives, workshops and promotional activities. The government shall also attempt to undertake interventions such as smart dustbins and waste segregation at various tourist sites and wayside amenities for the efficient disposal of waste. On a case-to-case basis, the government may consider funding integrated and efficient waste management efforts at tourist sites and destinations.

e. Sustainable transportation

Efforts will also be made towards the adoption of e-vehicles for tourist transportation to the extent possible. This may also include the declaration of certain eco-fragile zones such as national parks and environmentally sensitive regions as e-vehicles zones wherein ICE vehicles will not be permitted to go beyond a certain point. Apart from checking the environmental deterioration of the regions, such a step will also create employment opportunities for the locals.

Additionally, e-buses may be introduced on the major circuits to check pollution and vehicular traffic on the major routes and destinations.

Core Guiding Principle 2 - Employment generation & entrepreneurship

Meghalaya has a large youth population - almost 74% of the population falls in the age bracket of under 35 years. It is one of the government's priorities to create gainful employment opportunities and enable the youth to contribute meaningfully to the economy. Tourism presents a huge opportunity to address this challenge in a sustainable manner. The industry is labor-intensive and creates diverse employment opportunities for women and men alike. The government shall focus on leveraging the same and encouraging tourism entrepreneurship by providing an enabling environment for building enterprises.

Meghalaya has a bustling startup ecosystem and has been ranked as the best-performing State in the National Startup Ranking framework of 2021. The flagship program for the promotion of entrepreneurship, called PRIME (Promotion and Incubation of Market Driven Enterprises), focuses on making entrepreneurship the preferred mode of livelihood. As part of PRIME, special attention shall be given to tourism-related enterprises and products.

A large proportion of employment opportunities in the State are currently concentrated around the Shillong urban agglomeration region; tourism also presents an opportunity to create employment in a decentralized manner in rural locations. The government shall make conscious efforts to create new infrastructure and develop new destinations in hitherto underexplored regions, thus enabling development in a regionally balanced manner

As the Government develops new circuits, it will also strive to create regular employment opportunities in large numbers for the local rural youth. This may include leasing out smaller government properties to entrepreneurs and collectives for operations, supporting individuals and collectives in setting up restaurants and other ancillary activities such as subsidizing the purchase of tourist vehicles. Suitable mechanisms may also be developed for the skilling of local communities to enable their participation in the tourism sector. In addition to skilling and tourism-specific soft and hard skills, such programs shall also enable households and individuals to produce and supply products that are demanded by the tourism industry.

Core Guiding Principle 3 - Community Participation

The State has a strong system of community ownership and governance at the grass-root level through its traditional institutions. All the three major tribes of Meghalaya viz., Khasi, Garo and Jaintia follow their own customary laws, traditions and practices to govern their land, water

and forest resources which are protected in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. All elements of governance structures work concurrently and in synergy for achieving the developmental objectives of the State. This administrative structure provides excellent conditions for the government to work with traditional institutions through community consultation for the implementation of various programs and schemes. Further, the communities own a significant portion land and most of the famous destinations such as Nohkaliaki falls, Sohra; Krang Suri falls, Amlarem; Laitlum viewpoint, the root bridges at Nongriat, Sohra and Pynursla area; the water bodies and fish sanctuaries at Bansamgre and other area in Garo Hills, the various caves and sacred groves fall under the ownership of communities.

The government has been engaging communities for the development of tourism in the State. This includes the formation of rural tourism cooperative societies and empowering and facilitating the communities to run tourism centers in villages. For instance, the various 'Travelers' nest' rural accommodation units at Kongthong (East Khasi Hills), Mawphanlur (Eastern West Khasi Hills), Mawlyngbna (East Khasi Hills), and the Chandigre rural tourism resort (West Garo Hills) were built with the assistance of the State Government but are completely owned and operated by the local tourism cooperative societies. Efforts will be made to recognize and fund more village tourism cooperatives through the apex tourism cooperative society and through other innovative models.

The communities are also at the forefront of celebrating the traditional festivals of Wangala, Shad Suk Mynsiem, the Nongkrem dance and Behdienkhlam. The communities also play a critical role in organizing modern festivals such as Me.Gong and Cherry Blossom. Efforts will be taken to further empower and engage the communities to expand these festivals and organize festivals in new destinations.

The government also organized a locality beautification competition in 2021 wherein the communities in Shillong, Tura and Jowai were provided support to take up beautification activities in their localities. The initiative was aimed at empowering community-level institutions to take on beautification and enhancement activities and projects in their respective localities and to improve their tourism quotient. Given the success of the initiative, the Government will strive to make it a well-funded annual program and to expand to other towns of the State. Further, the communities already conduct regular cleaning and plantation drives and the same has been recognized and appreciated in the past. The government will further collaborate and support the communities in these initiatives.

For the State to realize its full tourism potential, it is critical that the government leverages this unique communitarian model by engaging with the communities in all future initiatives too. As a start to this, the government has recently notified the State Public-Private Policy which has a dedicated section on making the communities a stakeholder in infrastructure

development. This will promote growth by attracting investments while safeguarding and promoting the interests of the communities. Other innovative revenue-sharing methods for running various tourist sites built by the government may also be formalized with communities.

Efforts shall also be made to engage communities in a more systematic way and collaborate with existing institutions such as village cooperative societies. Given the centrality of youth to the State's development paradigm, youth groups may also be encouraged and supported to take up tourism-related activities. The Government shall undertake all efforts to leverage the unique communitarian spirit of the State and will work towards building Meghalaya tourism around the community tourism brand.

Core Guiding Principle 4 - Technology

Technology forms the backbone of any industry in today's day and age. In the tourism sector, it can provide seamless destination discovery, bookings, ticketing, customer connect, training, helplines, and feedback.

Meghalaya will strive to become one of the leading states that incorporates technology to manage the entire tourism ecosystem more efficiently and improve the overall tourism experience. Efforts shall be made to leverage technology to provide real-time updates on footfalls, traffic, and occupancy and help the stakeholders manage pricing and carrying capacity. The availability of such information would help the government in planning for peak seasons and mega-events such as regional/national games and music festivals. This will also help the State in devising focused marketing campaigns. The option of incorporating technology for improved brandings such as the creation of 3-D models/imagery of archaeological sites and prominent destinations may also be explored to appeal to a wider audience.

The 'Meghalaya Tourism' App was launched in 2020 and currently enables a user in planning their trip and booking hotels, taxis and guides. This app would be further upgraded to make it a single point of accessing information and tourist facilities for all visitors. Further, a feedback portal will also be developed as part of the official tourism app/website for the visitors to record their experiences, grievances, and suggestions. The Government shall endeavor to incorporate technology in improving the safety of tourists through helpline numbers, disaster warnings and emergency support.

Core Guiding Principle 5 - Synergy with other departments and schemes/programs

The tourism department is the nodal department for the purpose of the development of tourism in the State and the implementation of this policy. However, many sites, destinations and programs are operated/implemented by various other departments that are popular among tourists. Examples of these include Ward's Lake, Shillong (managed by the Forest department), Umkhakoi Lake, Mawlyngbna (Soil & Water Conservation department), Fish sanctuaries in Garo Hills (Fishery department) and the Textile Centre - Umden, Ri Bhoi (Textile Department). For such destinations and programs, the tourism department will work in collaboration with the concerned department to bring them under the common umbrella of tourism for the purposes of online ticketing, promotions, community participation and training programs.

Further, innovative models may also be worked out to leverage synergies with other departments that undertake tourism development. For instance, projects pertaining to improving connectivity to tourist destinations may be taken up under the North East Special Infrastructure Development Scheme (NESIDS) program of the Ministry for the Development of the North Eastern Region (MDoNER), Mahatama Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and with assistance from external funding agencies such as the World Bank, JICA, NDB, and ADB. Complementarities may also be developed with other programs such as those funded by the Government and India (GoI) and external funding agencies. For instance, tourism spots can be easily developed around water related infrastructure being built under various GoI, State and externally funded projects. Additionally, the Tourism department will collaborate with agencies like Meghalaya State Skills Development Society (MSSDS), Meghalaya Basin Management Agency (MBMA) and Meghalaya Institute of Entrepreneurship (MIE) to bring greater attention to Tourism sector in their skilling and entrepreneurship development programs. Collaborations will also be built with Agriculture and Forest departments to build Agrotourism, nature-based tourism in protected areas and wildlife tourism.

Thrust areas of the Tourism Policy

While the 'Core Guiding Principles' outlined the strategic underpinning for tourism development in the State, certain thrust areas have also been identified where actions will be

initiated in the immediate, medium and long term to achieve the overall objective and vision of this policy.

Thrust Area 1 - Core & auxiliary infrastructure

Infrastructure forms the basis for high-value and sustainable tourism. One of the fundamental objectives of this document is to encourage tourists to spend longer durations in the State, which would mean building high-value accommodation units in sufficient numbers, opening newer destinations and building roads to connect more and more destinations. The State must have the requisite infrastructure for the robust growth of tourism in the State. These will include the following -

a. Quality Accommodation

Quality accommodation facilities are critical to the growth of tourism at any destination. They attract tourists who have a higher propensity to spend and add to the overall income opportunities of the residents and of the State. They also help in attracting repeat travelers who are the mainstay for the development of any tourist destination. With the growing trend of ‘Work from home/anywhere (remote working)’ and staycations post the COVID pandemic, a large section of the workforce is opting to work from locations that can provide good accommodation and internet facilities.

Meghalaya currently has about 640 accommodation units comprising 5,100 rooms (those registered with the tourism department as of 2021 - the actual numbers may be slightly higher). The number of rooms is too few in a State that sees a footfall of 12.7 lakhs (expected to touch 15 lakhs by 2024). To add to this, a very small proportion of these rooms command a high tariff that is preferred by high-value tourists. Further, all of them remain completely booked during the major tourist seasons and thus put an artificial cap on the number of tourists that can visit the State on any given day. To add to this, over 90% of these rooms are in the Umiam-Shillong-Sohra belt, which again acts as a major factor behind the uneven distribution of tourist footfall in the State.

With the rising popularity of nature-based tourism, a reversal in trends of outbound foreign tourists who are now preferring domestic destinations and an increase in disposable income, the demand for quality accommodation is only going to increase in the future. Accordingly, the government will strive to undertake measures with participation from the private sector to augment the number of high-value rooms with a specific focus on making these facilities available in newer geographies. These may include large hotels/resorts built and operated by established brands and operators -

similar to Vivanta Meghalaya, Shillong and Courtyard by Marriott; medium-sized properties operated by individual and community cooperatives and homestays operated by individual entrepreneurs. Funding for these may be mobilized through GoI programs, external funding agencies, State resources and the private sector. Collectively, the Government shall strive to double the number of accommodation units in the State within the next five years, 50% of them being of high value (falling in the highest GST slab).

Another critical issue that the Government may take on priority is having quality accommodation units made available in all the district HQs and subdivisions. Currently, apart from Shillong, Sohra and Tura, hardly any of the administrative centers have quality accommodation facilities. This again acts as a deterrent to the growth of tourism in the underdeveloped regions of the State and steps may be taken to fix this gap.

b. Iconic and public infrastructure

Apart from the nature-based destinations that act as the primary attraction for a State like Meghalaya, other iconic infrastructures too pique the interest of tourists. Examples of these are the Jatayu Earth's Centre Nature Park in Kollam, Kerala and the Statue of Unity in Gujarat. These also include vibrant public spaces such as Chandni Chowk (Delhi), mall roads in hill stations and Khyndailad (Police Bazaar) in Shillong. Large infrastructure such as ropeways and skywalks too attract many tourists for the unique experiences that they can provide.

Meghalaya is popular for its waterfalls, caves, valleys, rivers, forests, parks and lakes. However, it hardly has any iconic infrastructure that may act as an attraction. This is a deterrent as there are not many options for tourists to indulge in activities.

To attract a range of tourists and prolong their stays, such attractions are necessary. To plug this gap, the State Government shall strive to build new infrastructural works that may be called 'Iconic Infrastructure'. These may include ropeways, skywalks, public squares, adventure parks, convention centers, viewpoints and museums among others. Efforts may also be taken to develop town squares and congregation spaces in the towns of Shillong, Tura and Jowai as vibrant centers for performances and leisure activities. Special attention may also be paid to developing sports infrastructure to transform Meghalaya into a sporting hub and putting it on the national and international maps.

c. Land Banks

Given the pattern of land ownership in the State wherein a large portion of the land is either owned by or is under the control of communities and private individuals, it is extremely challenging for the government to take up large infrastructure projects or to attract investments from the private sector.

The government shall endeavor to work towards creating land banks across all the major tourist locations/destinations/routes which can then be handed over/leased to interested and eligible third parties to build infrastructure or undertake tourism-related activities. This will be done in collaboration with all the stakeholders including communities and such endeavors will be in accordance with the PPP policy of the State.

d. Wayside amenities

Meghalaya is a State wherein the journey is considered to be more important than the destinations by the tourists. To add to the comfort level of the tourists and to make their travel safer, it is necessary that provisions are made available along the prominent routes. The State does not have sufficient facilities such as drinking water, toilets, availability of refreshments, parking, rain shelters etc. along the major circuits/roads/destinations. The ones that exist such as those at the Umiam Viewpoint, Mawkdok and Nohsngithiang Falls function in a haphazard manner and do not adhere to the tourism standards.

As part of the new tourism policy, steps may be taken for the development of wayside amenities to improve the convenience and safety of tourists by offering standardized experiences through a range of facilities.

e. Tourist Information Centers & Signages

It is important to have facilities for providing quality information on tourism at every tourist spot, town and major transport node such as the airports, the taxi stands and ISBTs at Shillong, Tura and Guwahati. The Government may take steps to set up tourist information centers at all major destinations, cities and transport nodes with IT-enabled information kiosks and trained staff to cater to the needs of visitors. All information centers should ideally also have maps along with contact details of nearby hospitals, police stations and other important tourism infrastructures.

Given that signages are a powerful tool to communicate with tourists and provide invaluable information to tourists who are new to the state, all the important tourist sites may also be equipped with proper signages to communicate with the tourists regarding the 'dos' and 'do-nots' as well as emergency/helpline numbers.

f. Accessibility for differently abled persons

The government envisions Meghalaya to be the model tourist destination that serves all kinds of experiences (nature, adventure, staycation) with adequate safety and comfort to all segments of tourists. This also includes the differently abled group who often require special attention and dedicated infrastructure. It is estimated that about 2.1% of India's population is differently abled and the State should have the required facilities and supporting infrastructure for their comfortable visit.

In this regard, a detailed guideline may be issued to all the concerned stakeholders - government departments, hotel and homestay owners, cooperative societies and operators to build differently abled friendly infrastructure to the extent possible. This may include toilets, including those at wayside amenities, ramps and provision of wheelchairs.

Thrust Area 2 - Connectivity Infrastructure

The ease of connectivity is probably the most important determinant of the growth of tourism at any destination. In the context of Meghalaya, this means that the tourists should not just have ease in reaching the State but connectivity to the various destinations within the State should also be comfortable.

a. Physical infrastructure

The present levels of connectivity to and within the State fall short in comparison to the major tourist hubs such as Kerala or Uttarakhand. Though most of the destinations in the State have all-weather connectivity, there is a huge scope for improvement when it comes to enhancing the tourism experience. Currently, tourists face difficulties in accessing far-off destinations such as Mawsynram, Mawkyrwat, Balpakram, Nokrek and Siju. These and many such sites are underexplored because of insufficient connectivity and have a lot of potential to attract tourists.

Meghalaya currently has one functional airport in Umroi (about 30 Km from Shillong) and has direct flights to the cities of Kolkata, Aizawl, Dimapur, Guwahati, Agartala, Dibrugarh, Imphal, Lilabari and Silchar. Additionally, daily helicopter services are also available from Shillong to Tura and Guwahati.

The road density in the State is about 50 Km per 100 square km which is way lower than the national average of 180. Six national highways with a total length of about 1,120 Km pass through the State connecting the cities of Shillong, Jowai, Tura, Nongstoin and Dawki.

To improve air connectivity to the State, the State Government will strive to take the necessary steps to establish direct connectivity with major cities such as New Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Chennai. Further, efforts shall be made to operationalize the Baljek airport in Tura to improve connectivity to Garo Hills. The Government may also expand the helicopter services to Williamnagar, Dawki and Sohra. Further, keeping the long-term objective of attracting high-value tourists to the State, the Government may also explore the possibility of setting up a greenfield airport to cater to larger flights (the Umroi airport can only service 78-seater flights and not the standard 192-seaters)

The Government shall also strive to improve the overall road connectivity within the State and particularly to the tourist destinations. Construction of bypasses may also be prioritized to reduce the pressure on the Guwahati-Shillong-Silchar road. For a comprehensive long-term plan, a channel of formal communication may also be established with the Public Works Department (PWD). Additionally, the connectivity projects laid down in the master planning of the newer circuits may be taken up on priority. Further, a blueprint may also be prepared to provide last-mile connectivity to remote destinations.

Apart from the funds available with the tourism department and those mobilized from various external agencies and the GoI, efforts shall be made to ensure that the connectivity projects are taken up in convergence with other government departments' programs to the extent possible. For instance, this may include taking up last-mile connectivity projects under MGNREGS. Local communities and cooperative societies may also be involved in the identification of these projects. Innovative steps such as awarding contracts for the construction and maintenance of smaller roads and projects to the communities may also be explored. The option of creating a dedicated fund within the Tourism department for taking up last-mile connectivity may also be explored.

b. Transport Infrastructure

The selection of tourists' travel modes is determined by various parameters such as time, destinations to be visited, comfort and cost. A tourist State like Meghalaya needs to have multi modal transport options to cater to the varied mobility needs and demands of the tourists. At the same time, from a macro scale, it is important to look at the impact of such mobility systems on the environment.

As of today, the tourist transport infrastructure is scattered and is totally managed by taxi/tour operators based out of Meghalaya and Assam. Further, the availability of public transport to tourist locations is minimal. This is leading to an increase in vehicular traffic and pollution in our ecologically fragile geography. Further, congestion on the major arterial routes (Mawlai-Upper Shillong and Mawlai-Madanrting) leads to unpleasant experiences for tourists.

To improve the overall experience of the tourists and to minimize the impact on the environment, the following initiatives may be taken up in a time-bound manner.

- I. Electric buses may be introduced to cover popular destinations. This will have multiple benefits including the availability of cheaper modes of transportation for tourists, reduction in traffic and congestion, reduction in pollution and augmenting the tourism transport infrastructure in the State. Further, well-organized, and curated tours may also be started to achieve these objectives while providing a new experience to the tourists.
- II. The option of introducing e-vehicle/buggies at major destinations may also be explored. This may be coupled with restricting the entry of ICE tourist vehicles at such destinations. Further, a hub and spoke model may be developed wherein e-vehicles/buggies will take the tourists to different locations from a central point. This will promote sustainable tourism and increase employment opportunities for the local communities.
- III. A round-the-year training program may be designed for taxi drivers to provide them with the basic skills and knowledge of the hospitality industry.

- IV. The process of onboarding the Meghalaya-based taxi drivers and tour operators on the 'Meghalaya Tourism' app is already underway. This will increase transparency, ensure better price discovery, remove the hassles associated with bookings and will also augment the earning opportunities available to the operators from the State. This initiative may be expanded and accelerated to improve the options and experience of the tourists.
- V. The Government may also consider the option of introducing luxury tourist vehicles and caravans on a subsidized model that may be operated by individual entrepreneurs. Such an initiative will add to the fleet available in the State and provide employment opportunities to the local youth.
- VI. It has been observed that there are no set standards in terms of timing, services and fares that are charged by the existing taxi operators operating from Guwahati airport, Umroi airport and ISBTs (Shillong & Tura) to city centers and tourist destinations. Efforts shall be made to regulate such practices in collaboration with the relevant stakeholders.

Thrust Area 3 - New Circuits - Expansion beyond the Umiam-Shillong-Sohra axis

Tourism in Meghalaya is currently concentrated around what can be called the North-South axis covering Umiam, Shillong and Sohra/Dawki. These destinations have most of the tourism facilities such as accommodation units and receive over 90% of the tourist footfall. This has led to enormous pressure on the existing resources and has also led to a regional imbalance in development.

The government should strive to develop new circuits beyond Umiam, Shillong and Sohra in a hub and spoke model. These may include the creation of infrastructure and connectivity to newer regions. The development of new circuits would not just reduce the pressure on the existing hotspots but would also lead to the creation of new infrastructures and livelihood opportunities in underserved regions.

A few such circuits have already been identified and master planning is at various stages for them. These include the Umngot riverfront (West Jaintia Hills), Jakrem (South West Khasi Hills), Nokrek national park and Tura in West Garo Hills, Balpakram National Park (South Garo Hills), and Khatarshnong, Pynursla, Sohra and Mawkynrew in East Khasi Hills.

A few more circuits such as the Ranigodam-Mairang (West Khasi Hills), Chokpot (South Garo Hills) and Saipung (East Jaintia Hills) have been identified and master planning for these shall soon be initiated. Efforts shall be taken to ensure that within the first year of this policy, the tourism department will do a comprehensive identification of all the circuits that can be developed.

Once the circuits have been identified, master planning will be done by competent agencies in consultation with communities in a very detailed manner. These plans may then be adopted through a process leading to the creation of tourism infrastructure in newer circuits.

Thrust Area 4 - Capacity Building

The success of any service industry is hugely dependent on the quality of human resources. The skills and services of the personnel involved in tourist activities are the key factors that drive the tourist experience. It is thus critical that they are well-trained in their field and have basic knowledge of the hospitality industry. This would increase the employability of the youth in the State and help them explore opportunities in other states.

The Tourism Department has an empaneled list of hotels that have been providing in-house training to service providers. Further, hotels under the Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) have also been conducting such training sessions. Apart from these, the tourism department also collaborates with institutes like the Institute for Hotel Management (IHM) and the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management (ITTM) to conduct regular training programs for those engaged in the hospitality industry. As part of this policy, these initiatives may be expanded with an annual training calendar.

Currently, several departments and agencies such as MSSDS and village cooperatives carry out training programs in an uncoordinated manner. There is no holistic plan for training on tourism-related activities. There is a need to integrate all the disparate programs and create a single registry of individuals who have graduated or gained certificates in hospitality sector courses. The 'Meghalaya Youth Policy 2021' seeks to

launch a holistic skill development program, under which youth will be supported to nurture skills through the provision of skill vouchers. The tourism department in collaboration with MSSDS may carry out strategic interventions for the assessment of skill gaps, preparation of a comprehensive human resource development plan for skill development, capacity building and entrepreneurship development in short term and developing a center of excellence in the long term.

To achieve these objectives, the tourism department may create annual plans to train a minimum of 1,000 persons every year on various tourism-related vocations such as tour guides, chefs, housekeeping, taxi operators and travel agents. This may be done with convergence with other departments such as the Transport Department and MSSDS. A dedicated budget under the tourism department may be separately earmarked for this initiative. The option of undertaking large-scale capacity-building programs may also be explored under the various projects that are being funded by external funding agencies.

Thrust Area 5 - Experiential Tourism

In what can be called a rising trend or a fundamental shift in approach towards tourism is that tourists no longer just want to hop from one destination to another, but they want to experience the culture, the way of living, the cuisine, and the artistic nuances of any destination. Meghalaya is suitably placed to take advantage of this scenario with its rich and varied offerings to cater to different kinds of tourists. Integration between tourism and sports, arts, agriculture, and crafts may also be created to build a range of unique experiences. The major facets around which experiential tourism can be developed are as follows -

a. Festivals

Meghalaya has a rich cultural and natural heritage, and many festivals are celebrated all around the year to commemorate the same. The colorful and vibrant festivals offer a unique opportunity for the State to position itself as a yearlong tourism destination. The government shall take efforts to promote events which will also endeavor to facilitate the creation of platforms and facilities where tourists can experience and participate in vibrant festivals.

b. Music -

Meghalaya is known for having strong musical roots and an abundance of musical talent; with Shillong, the State's capital, even being referred to as India's rock capital. Troupes, artists, and music festivals such as Shillong Chamber Choir, Lou Majaw and NH7 weekender have brought global recognition to the State. While music continues to be an integral part of the culture of the people of Meghalaya, the State has not been able to leverage its strengths in music and convert it into a tourism product.

Given the changing times and the birth of so many new genres of music, it is felt that emerging musical artists could do with grassroots musical platforms where they can hone their art and take this musical legacy forward. The Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project (MGMP) is a step in this direction, and it may be expanded to cover more destinations, including in other states, in the future. Further, national, and international artists may be invited to perform in the State on a regular basis.

c. Cultural experiences -

Meghalaya is a land of rich and varied experiences. From the festivals and music to the cuisine and to the handicrafts, all these different facets of life are not just a legacy of the intangible heritage of the communities and State, but also act as USPs to attract niche tourists from all over the world.

Currently, the inquisitiveness around art, culture and ways of living is limited to select villages and communities such as Umden, Ri Bhoi (silk) and Larnai, West Jaintia Hills (pottery). To be able to promote tourism around the cultural heritage, the government shall endeavor to start programs wherein tourists can visit, stay and indulge in the local ways of living all over the State. This may include learning the art of pottery in Siju and Larnai. Similar facilities may also be made available to learn the art of silk-making in Umden and interact with the community at Kongthong. This may even extend to the practice of beekeeping and making bitchi (local rice beer) in the Garo Hills region.

d. Adventure Tourism

Adventure tourism across the world is emerging as one of the fastest-growing tourism categories. It not only attracts high-value tourists but also opens new destinations which are hitherto underexplored. The government recognizes the ecological, cultural and economic value of prioritizing the product, however, it is also aware that proper

management and community involvement should be there for its success. The State is already well known for trekking, boating, rafting/kayaking and caving. There is also huge potential for various other activities such as rock climbing, paragliding, zip lining, mountain cycling, canoeing and water skiing.

The Tourism Department shall take steps to encourage and promote adventure tourism as one of the flagship tourism products in partnership with the adventure tour operators' association. To ensure the safety and security of the tourists as well as attract high-quality operators, detailed guidelines both in terms of safety and operations may also be issued from time to time.

Special attention may be paid to the promotion of caving in the State. Meghalaya is home to some of the most exquisite and longest caves in the world. The caving industry is still in a very nascent stage and has the potential to attract tourists and researchers from around the world over.

e. Eco and health tourism

Meghalaya is blessed with immense natural offerings and has the potential to make further growth with aggressive branding & marketing. The Government understands that one of the primary objectives of eco-tourism is the preservation of its natural offering by ensuring sustainable destination development and hence the Government is keen to promote Eco-tourism.

The following steps may be taken up to promote this new experience -

- Identification of unique selling points and development of eco-tourism brand
- Developing ecotourism destinations with eco-lodges that demonstrate the best practices of renewable resources community management and experiential learning
- Creating an institutional mechanism which could ensure seamless cooperation between the forest and the tourism departments for the promotion of ecotourism
- Creation of Health and Ayurvedic Centers

f. Film tourism

Meghalaya, with its mesmerizing locations and abundant water bodies, is an ideal place for outdoor film shooting. Several films and music albums have been shot in the State

in the past. The shooting of films and music albums serves a dual role of creating employment and organic branding for the State.

The Tourism department in collaboration with the Department of Information & Public Relations may take up the onus to promote film tourism in the State. To this end, efforts shall be made to showcase the relevant destinations and facilities on national and international platforms. A simplified framework for granting approval and clearances for film shooting along with tax breaks to the industry may also be pursued.

Thrust Area 6 - Promotion, Marketing & Branding

The overall objective of the tourism policy is to promote Meghalaya as a globally preferred sustainable and safe tourism destination contributing to the State's economy, enhancing the well-being of its communities, and enabling growth while conserving its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty. As a first step, the creation of a calendar of events for each season may be taken up. Such a calendar may list all the activities that have been planned for the particular quarter.

The government has been proactively and constantly promoting the tourism sector of the State both nationally and globally through a range of initiatives. This has resulted in the global recognition of the root bridges, Mawlynlong (cleanest village), Kongthong (whistling village) and Umngot river (cleanest river).

Going forward, the government may implement a focused marketing and promotion strategy. The focus should be on connecting with a larger group of customer base across the country in the short term and globally in the longer term while ensuring sustainable tourism development. The Tourism Department should continuously innovate to find new ways to engage the customer, generate brand awareness and loyalty and increase market share.

- a. The Government could prominently feature and participate in national and international tourism fairs and marts.
- b. The Government may design and release national and international campaigns to promote Meghalaya as an attractive, multicultural, and eco-friendly destination year-round.

- c. Initiatives such as incentivizing the Central/State/PSU government employees to travel on LTC (leave travel concession) may also be considered. These may include providing a dedicated guide or redeemable vouchers to such tourists. Such a step will be taken after consultations with the stakeholders and a separate cost-benefit analysis is done.
- d. The Tourism Department may consider onboarding a brand ambassador along with sponsoring events/festivals to gain traction among a larger audience.

Thrust Area 7 - Private Sector Participation

The promotion of tourism along with the creation of enabling infrastructure and facilities falls primarily within the ambit of the State government. However, the government might not have the required resources, capabilities or expertise to take up the task in a time-bound manner. In such cases, the private sector complements the efforts of the State government and at the same time adds the required capacity to cater to a higher number of tourists. The various ways in which the private sector can participate and contribute to the tourism growth story can be -

- a. Operations & maintenance (O&M) of larger accommodation units/ iconic infrastructure - Quite a few government-owned properties in the State have been leased out on long-term to private operators. These have proven to be the most efficient and well-run properties in the State. This model of O&M which brings out the best of both the public and the private sector could be continued wherever feasible/possible. Accordingly, efforts should be taken, in accordance with the State's PPP policy to attract investments and participation from the private sector wherever feasible.
- b. Iconic brands like Marriott and Taj Vivanta have already been onboarded to operationalize two large properties in Shillong. This should herald a new era for the hospitality industry in the State. Infrastructural works in the future may be taken keeping in mind the ease of participation of established brands to further give a boost to building the 'Meghalaya' brand.
- c. Areas of collaboration with platforms like AirBnB, MakeMyTrip and other prominent online platforms could also be explored to build a strong online presence of the State. Such a step will complement the 'Homestay Scheme' and create avenues of employment for the local population.

- d. The Meghalaya State Public-Private Partnership Policy was formulated in 2021 and it lays down the framework for the participation of the private sector in the creation and maintenance of infrastructure. It could be leveraged to attract the participation of the private sector in tourism on a large scale.
- e. Further, entrepreneurs may also be supported and encouraged to come up with unique products to cater to the sector.

Thrust Area 8 - Tourist Safety

Safety and security are key elements that influence the competitive advantage of a tourist destination. Tourists give significant weightage to safety or security challenges while deciding on their travel plans. The Government of Meghalaya is committed to prioritizing the safety and hygiene of tourists and residents. This is even more critical post-pandemic and there is a strong need to develop confidence and faith of domestic and international tourists in Meghalaya being a safe destination.

Meghalaya is generally considered as a safe destination for all segments of tourists including females and solo travelers. The communities too have been welcoming and helpful to the tourists. Practices such as the use of proper gear for boating, rafting, swimming and caving are also adhered to at most of the destinations. The incidents of any kind of mishaps are also very rare and all the stakeholders including the police, the guides and the communities must be appreciated for this. To further improve on the aspects of tourist safety, the following may be considered as future imperatives -

- a. To ensure the safety and security of the tourists as well as attract high-quality operators, detailed guidelines both in terms of safety and operations could be issued from time to time. Further, the entry of tourists to difficult destinations could be barred without an accompanying guide.
- b. To address the issue of the safety of tourists of Meghalaya, a dedicated police team may be set up as Tourist Police Force.
- c. A safety audit of all the treks could be conducted on a periodic basis and difficulty levels are assigned. First aid kits and emergency evacuation support may also be made available at all the treks.

- d. Taxi services play a vital role in tourist transportation. Hence, the government could focus on ensuring safe and comfortable road transit for tourists. All the tourist taxis may be enrolled with the tourism department. All such cabs should clearly display the driver's details including name, photograph, and contact no. Additionally, emergency numbers are to be properly displayed in these cabs. The taxis may also be retrofitted to have a SOS button.

- e. A dedicated helpline could be setup as a single point to contact to resolve the queries of the tourists. This could also be developed to cater to tourists who are in any kind of distress.

Thrust Area 9 - Standards, Certifications and Regulatory Framework

Presently, most of the tourist attractions and sites in the State are managed and maintained by a range of stakeholders such as village-level committees, community groups and associations and Dorbar Shnongs/Nokmas. Only a handful of properties and sites are managed by the State government such as Ward's Lake and the Orchid Lake resort.

This poses a need for a unified framework which outlines the minimum and recommended amenities and service levels for an enhanced and memorable experience for the tourists visiting the sites and for the sustainability of the sites. The government may come up with a framework to address this need and build further on it by the creation of a corpus fund with an institutional mechanism for undertaking various development works at the tourism sites and attractions.

A set of minimum acceptable and recommended standards shall be formulated for the tourism sites. These may be related to the various amenities at the sites such as tourism information centers, parking areas, public conveniences, shops, restaurants, seating areas, disabled-friendly access, viewpoints, signages, safety features, waste management, illumination, first aid, security and sustainability. The State government could also try to abide by and incorporate Government of India guidelines on various aspects of tourism standards to the extent possible.

Financing the tourism sector

The tourism sector is one of the mainstays of the economy and is critical to Meghalaya achieving the vision of being among the top 10 states within the next 10 years. Several interventions such as the creation of new infrastructure, capacity building, promotion & branding and tourist safety have been proposed to be prioritized in this policy document.

To achieve these objectives, a significant number of resources would need to be invested in the coming years. To begin with, the Government may consider systematically increasing the tourism budget over the coming years. It could also consider exploring various other sources of funding such as -

- a. The Government could leverage the various central sector schemes such as Swadesh Darshan, PRASAD and Amrut Sarovar to build tourism infrastructure.
- b. The Tourism Department could actively seek leveraging funds available with other departments for taking up projects in a convergence mode. Examples of this may include the last mile connectivity such as the provision of footpaths to tourist destinations under MGNREGS and constructing reservoirs in partnership with the Soil & Water Conservation Department.
- c. The Government is already a leader in the implementation of Externally Aided Projects. Several EAPs are currently being implemented to augment the infrastructure in the tourism sector. Additional efforts could be made to get more such EAPs approved over the next few years.
- d. Participation from the private sector could also be encouraged. The State's PPP policy lays a framework for the same. The tourism department may consider bringing out guidelines to increase private participation.

Institutional and implementation mechanism

Independent Committee for Standards

The mandate of the 'Independent Committee for Standards' will be to set and review the standards for the various activities in the tourism supply chain. This could include recommending standards on accommodation, tourist vehicles, guides, adventure sports, restaurants and other ancillary activities related to tourism. The committee could also provide standard certifications to the complying entities. The committee may meet periodically to assess and review the standards.

The proposed committee could comprise of

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- a. Director, Tourism
- b. Assistant Director, Tourism
- c. Chief Administrative Officer, Meghalayan Age Limited
- d. Managing Director, Meghalaya Tourism Development Corporation
- e. Secretary, Hotel Association
- f. Secretary, Adventure Sports Association

High-powered Committee

A high-powered committee chaired by the Chief Secretary will be constituted to review the progress made by various departments/ against the various key performance indicators marked in the performance management framework

The committee could comprise of -

- a. Chief Secretary
- b. Senior-most Secretary, Tourism
- c. Director, Tourism
- d. Assistant Director, Tourism

Empowered committee

An empowered committee chaired by the Hon'ble Chief Minister will be constituted to review the overall growth of tourism in the State. It could comprise of -

- a. Chief Minister
- b. Minister i/c Tourism
- c. Chief Secretary
- d. Senior-most Secretary, Tourism

Performance Management Framework

It is recognized that developing a structured performance assessment standard is critical to measuring the success of initiatives taken up by the government. It shall also be an essential tool for monitoring the objectives of this policy and making course corrections as and when necessary.

The government shall endeavor to develop a framework for accessing and evaluating the overall growth of tourism and thrust areas as envisaged in this policy document.

Thrust Areas	Performance monitoring indicators
Accommodation units	1. No. of high-value rooms added (those that command a tariff greater than Rs. 5,000)
	2. No. of star-rated hotels in the State
	3. No. of homestays established
	4. No. of rural accommodation units set up in collaboration with tourism cooperatives
Iconic Infrastructure	1. No. of new iconic tourist destinations developed
	2. No. of tourist destinations upgraded/ renovated
Land Bank	1. Quantum of land bank with the government/ tourism department

	2. Quantum of land bank made available to other parties for development
Wayside amenities/ rain shelters	1. No. of wayside amenity points developed
	2. No. of rain shelters constructed
Tourist Information Centers	1. No. of TICs built
	2. No. of TICs upgraded
	3. No. of tourists served/ queries resolved
Accessibility to differently abled	1. No. of differently abled friendly tourist destinations in terms of access
	2. No. of differently abled friendly hotels
	3. No. of differently abled friendly public toilets
New circuits	1. No. of master plans made
	2. No. of circuits developed
Transport infrastructure	1. No. of new tourist vehicles inducted
	2. No. of parking bays developed
	3. No. of e-vehicles/buggies inducted
	4. No. of new destinations connected via helicopter services
	5. No. of new routes opened to tourist bus services
Capacity Building	1. No. of hospitality personnel (front desk, housekeeping, chef etc.) trained
	2. No. of guides trained
	3. No. of tourist vehicle operators trained
	4. No. of community/cooperative training exercises conducted
	5. No. of government officials trained

	6. No. of exposure trips conducted
Experiential tourism/ tourism products	1. No. of tourism (music, literary, food, film, adventure etc.) festivals conducted in each of the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia Hills regions
	2. No. of caving destinations developed
	3. No. of adventure tourists
Promotion/ Marketing/ Branding	1. No. of subscribers to the social media handles (YouTube, Instagram, Twitter etc.)
	2. No. of views/ engagements on the social media handles
	3. Participation in national tourism fairs
	4. Participation in international tourism fairs
	5. No. of road shows done
Tourist safety	1. No. of trekking routes inspected and rated on difficulty level
	2. No. of training on first aid/ emergency response to tourism societies/ communities
	3. No. of tourist grievances resolved
Others	1. Contribution of the tourism sector to GSDP