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Economic Viability and Prospects of Tourism: An Exploratory Study with reference to the Sikkim State, India

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Abstract: Tourism is the largest sector for providing direct and indirect employment opportunities. Consequently, Tourism contributes significantly to the growth and development of the economy. The present paper discusses the status, prospects, along with challenges of tourism in the Sikkim State of India. To keep the discussion comprehensible, statistical tools like regression analysis and ANOVA are used for analysing the data collected predominantly from secondary yet reliable sources. Abysmal infrastructure, lack of substitutes for means of transport, boundary issues, pitiable connectivity, lack of media & print coverage, insurgencies, as well as ethnic conflicts, are the disputes before the sector. Therefore, the Government ought to execute appropriate policies and measures so that the contribution to the state's gross domestic product will be promising for the development of the Economy.

Keywords: Eco-Tourism, Hospitality, Gross Domestic Product, SWOT Matrix, Sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a nature-based activity that increases people's interest in certain places. Such activities will be economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable and helpful for the well-being and conservation of the areas. Such tourism can be classified as mass Tourism and alternative Tourism (Bhutia et al., 2022). Mass tourism is the traditional type of tourism. Alternative tourism is a 'competing paradigm' to mass tourism—sustainable ecotourism profits equally the visitors and the local people. Ecotourism is useful for increasing conservation and economic growth (Chandy, 2019). Eco-tourism helps in the protection of natural areas, increasing the educational level of the locals, generating money, increasing the quality of tourism, and increases local participation. (Devi, 2021).

There is much evidence of the adverse effects of ecotourism on nature. Such effects depend on the choice of activities, location and timing, equipment, group size etc. Soil modification, crushing or clearances of vegetation, water pollution from human waste, and disturbance to wildlife are a few examples (Dutta, 2020). Eco-tourism benefits both the guests and the hosts. It promotes local cultures and environmental awareness. Eco-tourism is based on certain principles, like as: (a) travel to natural destinations, (b) respect local culture; (c) minimize impact on nature; (d) provide financial benefits and power for local people; (e) provide direct financial

benefits for conservation; (f) support human rights and democratic movements; and (g) build environmental awareness (Karmakar, 2022).

There are more opportunities for tourism in the northeastern region of India. This region is known for its abundant natural diversity and eco-friendly destination (Palit et al., 2020). The mystic Himalayas and diversified flora and fauna make the region unique for ecotourism. The governments of the regions implemented policies for developing sustainable tourism (Singh et al., 2017). Sikkim is considered the prized jewel of Northeast India. Kaziranga National Park, near Golaghat, Manas National Park, Barpeta, and Nameri National Park, Sonitpur, are the perfect places for ecotourism in Assam (Rizal&Asokan, 2013). Apatani Plateau, Tsanga Community Conservation Reserve, and Namdapha National Park are the major attractions for eco-travellers in Arunachal Pradesh (Sharma et al., 2023). East Khasi Hills, Mawphlang Sacred Forest, and Mawlynnong Village are the major attractions for eco-travellers in Meghalaya (Sattar, 2018).

OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this paper is to explore the current state, future potential, and obstacles facing the tourism sector of Sikkim. The specific objectives include:

- To study the current scenario of the Tourism Sector in the state of Sikkim
- To study the economic opportunities of tourism in Sikkim, and
- To assess the contribution of Gross Domestic Product to economic development.

HYPOTHESIS

The following hypothesis has been developed based on the above objectives, which are as follows:

- H_{01} : There is no relation between tourist arrivals and the Gross State Domestic Product of Sikkim, and
- H_{1a} : There is a relationship between tourist arrivals and the Gross State Domestic Product of Sikkim.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

- **Study region depiction:** Sikkim is situated in the eastern Himalayas, north of the Siliguri Corridor. It has international borders with Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet. It has four cardinal subdivisions: West, South, East and North Sikkim. It is the 27th smallest state of India. Lepcha, Limbu, Bhutia, and Magar are the main inhabitants of the state. The total geographical area of Sikkim is 7,096 km². Gangtok is the capital of Sikkim and it has six districts. Nepali, Sikkimese, Lepcha, and English are the official languages. According to 2011 census, the population of the state was 610,577, and the literacy rate was 81.42 percent. The density of the population in per square kilometre was 86.



- **Design and approach:** The current investigation is underpinned by secondary data. The data has been sourced from reports by the Tourism Department, Government of Sikkim, along with Sikkim Tourism Statistics. In addition, the current study references several articles and books.
- **Method of analysis:** To elucidate the evolution of Sikkim's tourist sector overall and the specific aspects of eco-tourism, several qualitative research approaches, including tabulation and textual analysis, were employed. The author employed a straightforward regression model to ascertain the association between gross state domestic product along tourist arrivals. The regression analysis has two variables: gross state domestic product as the dependent variable, moreover tourist arrivals as the independent variable.

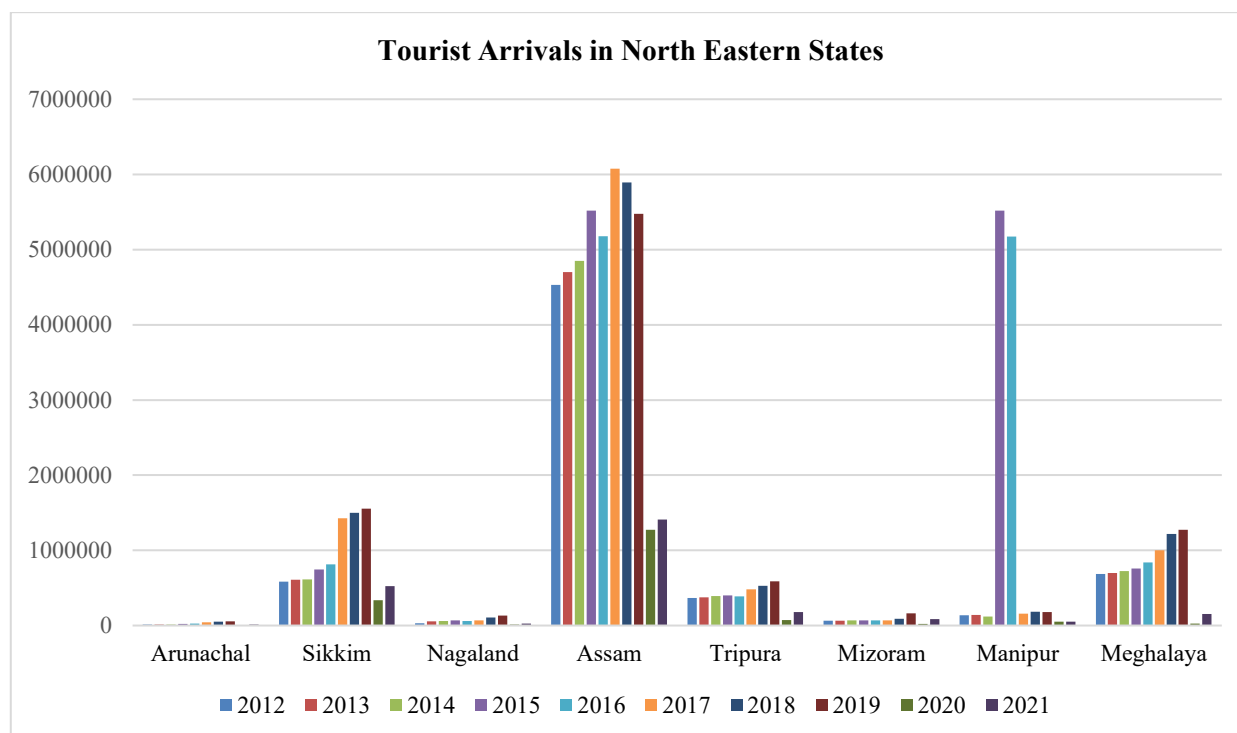
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(a) The economic opportunities of tourism in Sikkim

Sikkim is a beautiful state in the northeastern part of India. It is a unique place with the rugged mountains, dense forests, deep valleys, raging rivers, lakes, and waterfalls. Sikkim is well-known among tourists for the Kanchenjunga peak, which is the 3rd maximum mountain in the world. Nathu-la, Jelep-la, and Cho-la mountain ranges were previously worked as corridors of passage between Sikkim and Tibet. Sikkim has many rivers. Teesta River, Rangeet River, Teesta River, Lachen, Relli, and Jaldhakar rivers are the prominent rivers. Water flow in the rivers increases during the monsoons due to the monsoon rains and meltwater from glaciers. Rafting and camping on the beaches are popular among tourists. Lachen River is one of the tributaries of the Teesta River. Lachen

Gompa and Yumthang Valley are popular places near the river. The origin of the Teesta River is the Cho

Lhamu Lake in North Sikkim. It merges with the river Rangeet in Mangan.



Graph 1: Comparison of Tourist Arrivals in Northeastern States

Graph 1 show that Assam is in the leading position of tourist arrivals, followed by Sikkim, Meghalaya, and Tripura. Gangtok is the capital as well as the industry hub of Sikkim. It is a attractive hill station. Tsomgo Lake, Enchey Monastery, Ganesh Tok, Jhakri falls, Tashi Viewpoint, Nathula Pass, Hanuman Tok, Ranka Monastery, Rumtek Monastery, Baba Harbhajan Singh Temple, Kabi Longtok, Seven Sisters Waterfalls, Saramsa Garden, and Phodong Monastery are popular tourist places in Gangtok. Tsomgo or Changu Lake is situated 12,400 feet above sea level. The colour of the

water of the lake changes in every season, and freezes during winters. Nathula Pass is the ancient Silk Road between India and Tibet. It is nearly 14,140 feet. Above sea level, and a large number of travellers visit the place during autumn and summer. Hanuman Tok is situated at nearly 7,200 feet above sea level. Travellers can view the Kanchenjunga range from the temple. Himalayan Zoological Park is nearly seven kilometers from the capital. Himalayan Black Bears, Red Pandas, Himalayan Palm Civets, and Snow Leopards are the main attractions of the zoo.

Table 1: Year-wise Tourist Arrivals in Sikkim

Year	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Year	Domestic	Foreign	Total
2003	179661	11966	191627	2015	705023	38579	743602
2004	230719	14646	245365	2016	747343	66012	813355
2005	251744	16523	268267	2017	1375854	49111	1424965
2009	615628	17730	633358	2018	1426127	71172	1497299
2010	700011	20757	720768	2019	1421823	133388	1555211
2012	558538	26489	585027	2020	316408	19935	336343
2013	576749	31698	608447	2021	511669	11508	523177
2014	562418	49175	611593	2022	1625800	68600	1694400

Source: Department of Tourism, Govt. of Sikkim. (<https://sikkim.gov.in/departments/tourism-civil-aviation-department>)

The aforementioned table (1) delineates the annual visitor arrivals in Sikkim. The number of tourists has been consistently growing, but experienced a drop in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourist arrivals in Sikkim have been increasing continuously after the withdrawal of the COVID-19 restrictions. Tour operators, traders, taxi drivers, and vendors have suffered

more during the COVID-19 restrictions. Directly or indirectly, 75 percent local people of the state depend on the tourism sector. Domestic tourist arrivals numbered more than 1421823 in 2019, which dropped to 316408 in 2020. Conversely, international visitor arrivals totaled 133,388 in 2019, but in 2020, the figure plummeted to only 19,935. The primary reasons for the abrupt decline

in visitor arrivals are lockdowns along with travel limitations imposed due to the coronavirus outbreak.

Table 2: District-wise Tourist Places in Sikkim

District	Tourist Places
Gangtok	Baba Mandir, Rumtek, Changu Lake, and Gangtok.
Mangan	Guru Dongmar Lake, Thangu, Lachung, Yumthang, Rong Lungten Lee, Singhik, Seven Sister Falls, Phodong Monastery, Phensang Monastery, and Kabi Lungchok.
Soreng	Daramdin, Kaluk, Sombaria, Rinchenpong, Versey, and Soreng,.
Namchi	Karma RabdenlingGoenpa, Lho Khandro Sang Phug, Sharchog Bey Phug, Indian Himalayan Centre for Adventure and Eco-Tourism, TareyBhir, Temi Tea Garden, Siddheshwar Dham, Samdruptse, Jorethang, and Buddha Park.
Gyalshing	Dentam, Rinchenpong, Gyalshing, Sombaria, Tashiding, Utteray, HeeBermiok, Versey, Soreng, Yuksam, and Pelling.
Pakyong	Devi Mandir, Changey monastery, Pacheykhani cave, National Research Centre for Orchids, Shivalaya temple, Wednesday Bazaar 'hart', Karthok monastery and Monks' Retreat Centre.

Source: District websites.

(<https://igod.gov.in/sk/SK/E042/organizations>)

The aforementioned table (2) delineates the tourism destinations in Sikkim by district. Tourist destinations are distributed throughout the districts of the state. The lakes in Sikkim are exceptionally lovely. Lakes are distributed around the state. These lakes are favored by tourists for recreational and adventurous pursuits. Tourists engage in activities such as swimming, boating, and fishing. Tsomgo, Khecheopalri, Samiti, Green, and Gurudongmar Lakes are renowned lakes. Tsomgo Lake is referred to locals as Changu Lake. It is spread around one kilometre, and paradise for bird watchers. Menmecho Lake is well-known for its charming beauty. It is the source of the Rangpochu River. It is the perfect place for fishing or exciting adventures. The lake is covered by layers of snow in the winter, but lush greenery and varieties of flowers appear during the spring. It is 20 kilometres away from the Tsomgo Lake.

Karthok Lake is situated in the western part of Sikkim, and local people consider the lake a holy place. The lake is close to the coronation throne. Locals organised various rituals to thank the Gods for bringing prosperity to their lives. Khecheopalri Lake is the highest lake in the state. It is situated 38,710ft above sea level. It is the holiest lake for Buddhists and Hindus. Samiti Lake is situated amid two diverse mountains. It is the perfect place for relax of travellers, and trekking to the Dzongri or Goechala. Green Lake is a mysterious lake. It is situated on the Zemu Glacier. Khangchendzonga peak is

also viewable from the lake surface. This place is popular for fishing and the recreational tourist community.

Sikkim is a land in the Eastern Himalaya, stemming off the Siliguri Corridor. It has a multiplicity of ecosystems, landscapes, along wildlife. There are popular wildlife sanctuaries in Sikkim. Various exotic animals, like Red Pandas, Musk deer, Himalayan langurs, Leopard Cat, Himalayan Palm civets, Red foxes, and Asiatic Black bears are easily available in the sanctuaries. They are Kitam (Bird) Wildlife Sanctuary, Shingba Rhododendron, Kyongnosla Alpine, Fambong Lho Wildlife, Barsey Rhododendron Wildlife Sanctuary, Pangolakha, as well as Khangchendzonga National Park. Such places are popular among travellers for the wildlife experience. Khangchendzonga National Park is situated in the northern part of Sikkim. It accommodates with variety of splendid trees, animals, flowers, and plants. Pangolakha Wildlife Sanctuary is situated in the eastern part of the state. It is nearly about 124 square km. and surrounded by the Chola Range, and the Pangolakha Range. Barsey Rhododendron Wildlife Sanctuary is cited in the western part of Sikkim. This sanctuary is familiar among bird lovers, birdwatchers, trekkers, and photographers.

FambongLho Wildlife Sanctuary is spread over nearly 52 square km and is famous globally for its Avocado trees. It is the extension of the Kangchendzonga National Park. Kyongnosla Alpine Sanctuary is situated in the eastern part of Sikkim. Travellers can watch the rare trees such as Orchids, Ferns, Champ, and Oak. Shingba Rhododendron Sanctuary is the home to colourful rhododendrons, and orchids. It is a favourite place for nature and adventure lovers. Maenam Wildlife Sanctuary is rich in flora and fauna. It was established in 1987, and spread over 14 square kilometers. Kitam (Bird) Wildlife Sanctuary is situated at Kitam near Namchi. It is the best place in the state for bird and animal watchers. Khangchendzonga National Park covers almost 35% of Sikkim's area.

There are many caves situated in the Himalayan state. Dechen-phu cave, Lha-ri-nying-phuu cave, Sharcho-bey-phuh cave, and Khando-sangphu cave are popular among travellers. Dechen-phu cave is situated above Darap village near Pelling, west Sikkim. There is an old belief among the locals that people can prolong their lives by visiting the cave. Sharcho-bey-phuh cave is situated to the east of Tashiding. It has the religious significances. Dechen-phu cave is situated in the Darap village near Pelling, west Sikkim. Lha-ri-nying-phuu cave is situated above the Tashiding Trek route starts from Labdang village. There are many mountains offering trekking, like as Sandakphu Trek, Singalila Ridge Trek, Monastic Trek, Kasturi Orar Round Trek, Barsey Trek, etc.

Sikkim is more popular for its beautiful hills stations. They are the Gangtok, Pelling, Lachen,

Lachung, Yuksam, Namchi, Aritar, Legship, Ravangla, and Mangan. Hills Station of the state is the perfect place for nature lovers and adventure enthusiasts. Tourists participate in exciting activity sports such as mountaineering, mountain biking, village excursions, meditation, paragliding, along with hang gliding. Gangtok serves as the capital with the most populous city in Sikkim. The prominent attractions in Pelling include Kanchenjunga Waterfalls, Phamrong Falls, Pemayangtse Monastery, Rabdentse Ruins, Khecheopalri Lake, Rimbi Waterfalls, Sanga Choeling Monastery, Tashiding Monastery, Changey Waterfalls, and Singshore Bridge. Lachen is located in the Mangan District. Lachen is renowned for the Lachen Monastery, Guru Dongmar Lake, Tsopla Valley, Cho Lhamo Lake, Thangu Valley, and Lhonak Valley.

Lachung is situated in the north Sikkim district near the China border. Yumthung valley (Zero Point), Bhim Nala Falls, Naga Falls, Lachung Monastery, and Lachen are the popular destination in Lachung. Namchi is the capital of the south Sikkim district. Siddeshwar Dham / Char Dham, Sai Mandir, Tarey Bhir, Namchi Rock Garden, Kitam Bird Sanctuary, Ngadak Monastery, Samdruptse Hill & Ropeway are the popular places in Namchi. Ravangla is situated in the South Sikkim between the Pelling and Gangtok. Buddha Park, Ralang Monastery, Bon Monastery, Doling Monastery, Kheunpheling Carpet Centre, Temi Tea Garden, Borong Hot Springs, Maenam Hill, and Rangit Water World are popular places in Ravangla. Mangan town is situated in North Sikkim. It is well-known for its sparkling streams, thick forests, vibrant monasteries, soul-soothing ambience, and magnificent Himalayan peaks.

Sikkimese cuisine is a blend of Nepali, Lepcha, and Tibetan dishes. Such dishes are based on rice, culinary vegetables from the jungle. Sel Roti, Sha Phaley, Sishnu ko soup (Nettle Soup), Momo, and Hard Churpi are the popular dishes. Homestay accommodation is popular among tourists. Lepchas, Bhutia, and Nepali are the major natives. Mask Dance, Tashi Shabdo dance, Yak dance, Cham dance, and Maruni dance are the popular dances. Sikkim is well-known for the traditional handloom and handicrafts, like as wood carving, wooden mask making, thanka painting, and handloom weaving. The tourism industry is expanding in Sikkim. It has helped the state's economy.

Sikkim recorded a major tourism recovery in the first quarter of 2025, with impressive numbers reflecting the constant recovery from the setback caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Important goals such as Lake Tsumgo, Nasrapas, Pering and Lavanga continue to attract large crowds both in India and abroad. Companies that rely on tourism are already seeing the impact of relaxation. Local markets in Gangtok, Namchi, and other cities have experienced increased pedestrian traffic. Hotel reservations took quite a while, especially as we were expecting a summer vacation period to come. To save the environment, 50 admission fees have been introduced with Sikkim registration in the 2025 Tourism Trade Regulations. This fee is collected by tourists at the time of hotel check-in and applies to all visitors except children under the age of 5 and children visited for civil servants. INR 50 Rates aim to sustain the progress of tourism infrastructure, improve public services, as well as preserve the natural beauty as well as cultural heritage of Sikkim. The introduction of this fee should harmonize the increased tourism demand with environmental protection, allowing the state to absorb more visitors without affecting its sensitive ecosystems and local culture.

Table 3: Relationship between Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) and Tourist Arrivals in Sikkim

Year	Tourist Arrival	GSDP*	Year	Tourist Arrival	GSDP
2012	585027	123	2017	1424965	260
2013	608447	139	2018	1497299	284
2014	611593	154	2019	1555211	314
2015	743602	180	2020	336343	330
2016	813355	207	2021	523177	376

Source: Department of Tourism, Govt. of Sikkim. (<https://sikkim.gov.in/departments/tourism-civil-aviation-department>), and report of the Planning Commission of India. Note: *in ₹ billions.

Table 3 (a): Summary Output

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.240018104
R Square	0.05760869
Adjusted R Square	-0.060190223
Standard Error	90.98468356
Observations	10

Source: Calculated by authors.

Table 3 (b): ANOVA Analysis

	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	1	4048.39886	4048.39886	0.489042627	0.504176093
Residual	8	66225.70114	8278.212643		
Total	9	70274.1			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	195.5780509	65.46470501	2.987534289	0.017399257
Tourist Arrival	4.72719E-05	6.75974E-05	0.699315828	0.504176093

Source: Calculated by authors.

The data presented in table (3-a) indicates that the R square value is 0.057, suggesting a weak correlation between the independent variable X, which represents tourist arrivals, along the dependent variable Y, which denotes gross state domestic product. Table (3-b) indicates to facilitate the p-value (0.50) exceeds the significance value at the 5% level of significance ($p > 0.05$). Consequently, we will reject alternative hypothesis 1. It can be concluded that there is no relationship between domestic tourist arrivals along gross state domestic product in Sikkim.

(b) Challenges before the Tourism Sector

Sikkim experiences obstacles due to climate ambiguity, such as landslides and floods which can strongly affect tourism activities. Sikkim's height and unique landscape, with only 20% habitable, make it an ecologically vulnerable area. Vehicle contamination, waste generation, and overcrowding in popular tourist destinations such as Nasra's passing through Stamm Local Resources and Tsomgo Lake, will lead to environmental degradation. Mountainous areas and poor road conditions, especially during monsoons, can make travel difficult and increase the risk of landslides. Bad transportation connections with national highways (NH31A) as the main route are a major challenge. Tourist feedback indicates that low internet and mobile

phone availability is an issue that negatively affects the tourism experience. The lack of qualified and trained staff in the tourism sector could hinder its development. The balance between tourism growth and sustainability is extremely important for the long-term development of Sikkim.

Tourism departments necessitate including the commune more strongly in tourism planning, along with decision-making to ensure tourism is useful for the local communities in terms of livelihood. Promotion of sustainable tourism customs, such as ecotourism, along with unusual goals, is important to reduce pressure on popular places and minimize environmental impacts. Effective waste management is essential to prevent pollution and maintain the beauty of Sikkim's natural environment. Sikkim requires appropriate tourism financing to support infrastructure development, promote sustainable tourism, with improve the quality of services. The expansion of tourism not only created jobs but also gave other sectors such as transportation, telecommunications, and retail sales, increasing the positive impulse for economic growth and development. For discussing the existing indications of the tourism sector of Sikkim, the study has prepared a SWOT analysis, which are as follows:

Table 4: SWOT Matrix for Tourism in Sikkim

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Location for Look East Policy • Youthful Population • Strong Local Communities • Natural Resources • Moderate climatic conditions • Untapped natural beauty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image problem- myths about terrorist activities • Transport and Communication bottlenecks • Lack of network and synergy among public and private organizations
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vast rural villages • Identifying Niche Area Innovation • Special attention to Northeast India • Vast unexplored rural destinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Backwardness • Extortion network • Ethnic clashes • Competition with other states.

Tourism in the state so has great promise. Prominent elements for the likely expansion of the tourist industry are evergreen forests, unique & rich tribal culture, rich cultural legacy, undiscovered geographical characteristics, substantial English-speaking population, wildlife sanctuaries, varied biodiversity, river tributaries, and national parks. But the travel sector also faces difficulties. The problems facing the industry are terrible infrastructure, lack of alternate methods of transportation, border concerns, inadequate connections, lack of media and print coverage, insurgencies, and ethnic conflicts.

CONCLUSION

The economy of Sikkim is principally contingent on agriculture and the tourism sector. The state government receives assistance from the central

government and the Northeast Development Council as needed. The tourism sector generates employment, income, government revenue, foreign exchange, and infrastructure development. The region encompasses diverse ecosystems, landscapes, and wildlife. Village-based resorts, ethnic songs along with dances, festivals, handicrafts, organic produce, ethnic cuisine, as well as food products represent added advantages for ecotourism in the state. The state is ideally suited for ecotourism. The tourism sector faces several fundamental challenges, including insufficient tourist-friendly infrastructure, insufficient marketing with promotion, a lack of skilled manpower, the absence of a set of laws and standards, limited employment opportunities for locals, ecological impacts, and incidents of harassment and violence against tourists. Consequently, the Government must establish effective policies and measures to ensure that

contributions to the state's gross domestic product positively impact economic development.

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