

**COMMUNITY BASED EVENTS AND TOURISM
PROMOTION: A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO JONBEEL MELA IN ASSAM**

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ABSTRACT

Tourism today represents one of the fast growing industries owing to its capacity of large scale economic and social progress. Tourism industry not only attracts tourists from across the globe, but also provides opportunities for employment and the development of other allied industries. Events and event management provide for one novel tool for tourism promotion, especially for destinations where tourism is a seasonal affair. This paper attempts to establish this importance of events and event management for tourism. It further seeks to study the same with special reference to one of the major community based events in Assam, the Jonbeel Mela. Community based events and festivals carry the essence of a community's culture and heritage thereby pulling in the interests of tourists towards a new experience. Jonbeel Mela is a more than 500 year old event and known for preserving and showcasing the age old barter system. In addition to identifying the different stakeholders to this event, an attempt is made to understand the major task areas of managing the community event, Jonbeel Mela.

Keywords: Community, events, event management, festivals, tourism

INTRODUCTION:

Events are an integral and an indispensable element of human life. Since the dawn of civilization, man has always found reasons or occasions that stand out as distinct happenings in their lives. Managing of these happenings or the planned events as such, have ever since been a customary exercise for civilizations. These traditions and customs reflect an integral component of social growth and progression. Every culture inevitably consists of events and festivals that signify the fabric of a community. Community based events and festivals enable the celebration and preservation of community identity. However these customary procedures of man over the due course of time have taken the form of modern industrial practices. Consequently, an emerging field of practice by the name of event management takes precedence over the customs.

An event is an occurrence at a given place and time; a special set of circumstances; a noteworthy occurrence (Getz, 2007). Anything that happens under a special set of situations or conditions, or results out of it, or for a specific purpose, over a particular period of time at a particular place, can be termed as an event. Event management refers to the “professional business” of managing the uncommon happenings or occurrences in human life (Quinn, 2013). (Getz, 2005) states that event management encompasses the planning, and production of all types of events, including meetings and conventions, exhibitions, festivals and other cultural celebrations, sports competitions, entertainment spectacles, private functions and numerous other special events. It is the entire set of activities involved in the process of managing an event that has been thought of beforehand or the application of all management functions for the successful execution of an event. It is observed that culture and traditions somehow continue to survive through the community practices. Be it in the form of a customary practice or a professional business, events and their management provide a distinct platform for showcasing the culture and tradition of a region, especially with a tourism perspective. The purpose of this research paper is to analyse the potential of events and their management as a tool to promote tourism in Assam. It further seeks to explain the basic process of organising a community based event with special reference to *Jonbeel¹ Mela* in Assam along with identifying its various stakeholders from tourism perspective. This Mela is a three day event and the only fair in India where the practice of barter is still alive. Community festivals indicate “those events that emerge from within a place-based community to celebrate some aspect of its identity” (Quinn, 2013, p. 9).

Jonbeel Mela:

Assam is a land of rich natural resources and cultural heritage. One of the major states in the north-eastern region of India, Assam boasts of diverse ethnic groups and communities. Each of these ethnic groups has their own traditions and celebrations that culminate into unique events and festivals. The different ethnic groups in Assam comprise of the *Karbi, Dimasa, Mishing, Deori, Kachari, Tiwa, Kuki, Koch Rajbongshi, Chutia* and the *Bodo*. The present study is with reference to the *Tiwa* community and the traditional fair, *Jonbeel Mela*. Though the *Tiwas* are explicitly associated with the fair, the participation of other communities from the nearby regions or states cannot be ignored. In fact, the *Jonbeel Mela* provides for a common ground for some of these diverse communities from the hills and plains to come together for trade related activities.

The *Jonbeel Mela* is said to have been inaugurated in the 15th century at Jagiroad near the Jonbeel Lake for the different communities and tribes of Assam to come together and exchange various products and items through barter system in addition to enhancing cordial relationship with the members of the society (Saikia, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Event management has emerged over the past decade as a dynamic sector of the tourism and leisure industries (Arcodia & Reid, 2002) and have become interdependent sectors today. Events, being a part of a community heritage, provides for a unique tourism product, either on its own or as a part of a package. In fact (Harris, Jago, Allen, & Huyskens, 2000) affirms that the rapid growth in major events

¹ The word *Jonbeel* is derived from the Assamese words *Jon* which means the moon and the word *Beel* refers to a water body or a wetland like a lake.

in Australia occurred from mid-1980s owing to the financial success of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles and the consequent attempts to pursue major events by many state government tourism organisations in Australia. (Bowdin, McPherson, & Flinn, 2006), states events as an industry is recognised to be important owing to the WTO's recognition of the meetings and exhibitions industry as an official category in the Tourism Satellite Account. (McCartney, 2010) observes that Hallmark events act as key major events particularly renowned and linked to a city or destination. Thus events like the Olympics tend to create an attraction towards the host destination. (Jayswal, 2008) also highlighted the influence events can have upon attracting tourists through its varied forms as meetings, incentives, conferences, sports events and the cultural events. Moreover, the consumption of special events can create a positive impact on perceptions of the host destination (Hede & Jago, 2005). Also, mega events are often the impetus for developing the awareness of the host region (Ritchie & Smith, 1991). Further it is worth mentioning that for many developing countries, the growth potential of tourism provides a particularly attractive opportunity, especially in economies where the traditional industries are in a state of decline (Jago, 1997). And India being rich in both natural and historical resources has the optimal opportunities for developing its economy through tourism. Events were also seen to be beneficial if a destination seeks to develop infrastructure, enhance its saleability and "can do" image, or inject life back into itself (Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, & Ali, 2002). (Felsenstein & Fleischer, 2003) also highlights:

The most obvious reasons for the popularity of the local festival as a tourism promotion tool are that (1) festivals increase the demand for local tourism (Smith and Jenner 1998), and (2) successful festivals can help recreate the image of a place or contribute toward the exposure of a location trying to get on the tourism map (Kotler, Haider, and Rein 1993). (p.385).

Similarly, the impacts of global digital revolutions have also touched the village and community lives thereby exposing it to modern world practices. The same has been emphasized by (Aitken, 2002):

The life of the tribe or village community has developed into a far more complex urban sprawl and our once strong rituals and spiritual beliefs intrinsically linked to the seasonal cycles of our natural surrounds have been replaced by a more homogenous urban global sprawl wired up, digitalized, packaged, marketed and sold to us on the latest electronic medium. (p.4)

Events can prove to be very influential in attracting tourists through its varied forms as meetings, incentives, conferences, sports events and cultural events. (Yusoff, Ismail, Rahman, & Gwamna, 2015) also states events and meetings as one of the recognised lucrative and fast growing areas of tourism industry. (Hede & Jago, 2005) throws light on the issue that the consumption of special events can impact perceptions of the host destination, most likely in a positive direction. Furthermore, the consumption of special events appears to be useful in positioning the host destination in the market place against its competitors and origin destinations. (Walle, 1994, July) highlights the importance of tourism industry in its own rights, and how it gives clues to relate to marketing or festivals professionals when planning policies, strategies, and tactics. (Kelly, 2002) emphasizes upon the fact that small-scale events such as village festivals draw visitors from surrounding districts and may help give visitors from urban areas a more accurate perception of rural life. (Harris, 2005) also talks about the issue of community engagement through events and states how the negative impacts of events can stimulate community engagement towards positive mechanisms. Further (Liang, Illum, & Cole, 2008) highlights festivals, such as folklore festivals commonly seen in rural communities, help to preserve and revitalise local cultures and traditions, provide important leisure activity outlets, build social cohesion and provide opportunities for families to strengthen relationships with one another, greater understanding and appreciation of the community traditions and way of life. (Bouchan, Hussain, & Konar, 2015) also offers due regards to the association of tourism and event management owing to the fact of the volume of events that can be generated for pulling in international business tourists. (Getz, 2005) in an attempt to establish the inter relation of events and tourism highlights the core propositions of event tourism (as shown in Table 1) meant for reflecting the role of events in tourism.

Table 1: Core propositions of event tourism

- a) Events can attract tourists (and others, such as sponsors and the media) who otherwise might not visit a particular place; the spending of event tourists generates economic benefits; event tourism can be leveraged for maximum value in combatting seasonality of demand, spreading tourism geographically, and assisting in other forms of urban and economic development; portfolios of events can be designed for maximum impact, especially by appealing to multiple target segments.
 - b) Events can create positive images for the destination and help brand or re-position cities.
 - c) Events contribute to place marketing by making cities more liveable and attractive.
 - d) Events animate cities, resorts, parks, urban spaces and venues of all kinds, making them more attractive to visit and re-visit, and utilizing them more efficiently.
 - e) Event tourism acts as a catalyst for other forms of desired development (including urban renewal, community capacity building, voluntarism and improved marketing), thereby generating a long-term or permanent legacy.
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Source: (Getz & Page, 2016)

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

This study has been taken up with the following objectives:

1. To establish the importance of events and event management for tourism promotion
2. To identify the stakeholders involved in a community based event like *Jonbeel Mela*
3. To understand the process of event management through the *Jonbeel Mela*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This is an exploratory and descriptive study based on primary data and literature review. Unstructured interviews with the members of the organising committee provided with the primary data while literature in the form of research articles, news articles, and reports etc. on tourism, festivals and events provided with valuable secondary information for the study.

DISCUSSION:

It is thus observed from the review that whether it is for business or for pleasure, events in different forms carry the potential of pulling in tourists to a destination. (Getz, 2007) argues the role of events as attractors, animators, co-branders, image-makers and catalysts for a destination. So festivals and events, if planned and managed properly, can play a major role in drawing prospective tourists to visit certain destinations at least once, which may even turn out to be frequent visits. India is a country rich in culture and events related to different communities. These community-based events hold tremendous possibilities in terms of boosting the tourism scenario. (Irshad, 2011) also remarks “community events and festivals can attract local, national and international tourists and visitors” (p. 15). *Maha Kumbh Mela, Pushkar Mela, Rath Yatra, Ambubachi Mela, Hornbill Festival, Chandubi Festival* etc. are some examples of events which are very much a part of the community, culture and traditions prevalent in India and can be pitched for enhancing the tourists’ interest and the tourism sector at large.

Jonbeel Mela is a community-based event associated with the ethnic communities of Assam intended to celebrate the identity of the *Tiwas* and their socio-cultural practices. Accordingly, the host community, ethnic groups and residents represent the primary stakeholders to this fair. Since the fair is designed to maintain the age old custom of barter system and tribute to the honour and authority of the *Tiwa* kings, the major influences or consequences of holding this fair is observed to be upon the local community. The *Jonbeel Mela* at present is “organised under the auspices of the Gobha-Tiwa Deo Raja Jonbeel Samiti and at the direction of the Gobha-Tiwa Deo-Raja Rajdarbar” (Barkataki, 2017). So another stakeholder to this event is the organising committee responsible for holding this fair every January. Further, taking note of the importance of the fair, the Government of Assam has approached the United

Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for declaring the historic *Jonbeel Mela* a heritage festival and a heritage site in the Morigaon district of the state (UNESCO, 2014).² State interests seem to be obvious especially in terms of enhancing Assam tourism. *Jonbeel Mela* attracts thousands of tourists every year (Assam’s *Jonbeel Mela*, 2017)³ and consequently both domestic and international tourists become stakeholders in it. A 500 year old practice occurring annually in Assam would no doubt make news for all channels of mass communication. As a result, media enables adequate publicity of the event and the showcasing of the culture before a larger audience. So even media is an important stakeholder to the festival. Additionally, different scholars and researchers have been provided with a new area of study keeping in mind the diverse socio-economic and cultural outcomes of the event.

Measuring the outcomes and impacts of events is of utmost importance for the society at large. And the responsibility of undertaking the research and development work lies upon academics in addition to the policy makers. Table 2 enlists the different stakeholders and their interests in a community festival like *Jonbeel Mela*. Since it is evident from the review and the identification of the stakeholders and their interests, in addition to this, it also becomes imperative to understand the event management process involved in this community based event. *Jonbeel Mela* being a community event involves the active participation of the local community and the descendants of the *Gobha* and *Tiwa* royal family. As already mentioned, the fair is organised by a committee which is entrusted with the whole responsibility of making the necessary arrangements for the event and managing it. The *Jonbeel Mela* in 2017 cost around Rupees 20-25 lakhs, solely managed by the organisers. The fair is at least a two-month long preparation which is carried out by different sub-committees based on their lineage. The typical classification of the tasks include the invitation to the fair, collection of tax, arranging the meals, receiving the King, spinning the *Dhari* (mat) for the king, marketing and promotional tasks, and arranging the fair set up in terms of space and venue management. Further, security and medical facilities are also arranged for the people who are working for the event.

In his interview, J. Bordoloi, the Secretary of the committee (personal communication, April 3, 2017), reveals the major task areas such as planning out and dividing all the activities amongst the different members, assigning the responsibilities of some of the core areas, managing the finances and other resources, especially the people element for carrying out all the tasks. Ensuring the involvement of the village community and other tribes and people from the neighbouring regions is of prime importance for the event, for which adequate invitations in a traditional manner are sent. Some of these major task areas are summarised in Table 3.

Table 2: List of stakeholders to *Jonbeel Mela* and their interests

Stakeholder	Interests
Tiwa Royal Clan	The fair is a part of several centuries old tradition which needs to be maintained in order to preserve, protect and promote the ancient legacy of honouring the <i>Gobha</i> and <i>Tiwa</i> royal family along with retaining the identity of their extended members.
Local community & Ethnic tribes	It provides an opportunity of trade through barter and also monetary exchange for the local communities and other ethnic tribes. It further allows for growing brotherhood and building pride amongst the host community and people in and around the region.
Organisers	The organisers hold the fair under the directions of the royal family, with special interests towards retaining the relevance of the tradition and the descendants of the king as a mark of honour and respect.
Residents	<i>Jonbeel Mela</i> is of significance for the residents in and around the venue since such a huge fair exposes the people and the place for the rest of the world to witness and experience, thereby carrying the possibilities of positive intermingling and exchange of cultural capital. At the same time, the interest of the residents is also

² The Hindu, 2014, 01.19.

³ Hindustan times 2017. 01.21

Stakeholder	Interests
	obvious in terms of threats of acculturation process resulting out of excessive exposure to the commercial gains of the event.
Government & Tourism industry	The state and the policy makers have tourism related interests towards the fair since it carries huge potential as a tourism product. Managed in the right manner, it can yield benefits in terms of employment generation, for all tourism stakeholders.
Tourists	Both domestic and international tourists can reap the benefit of gaining a totally novel experience of attending the only living barter system in India, along with experiencing the ethnic culture of Assam.
Media	Media sector involving all forms of mass communication gets an opportunity to cover this incredible practice, thereby creating news, building social awareness and contributing to the holistic benefit of the event.
Researchers & Scholars	<i>Jonbeel Mela</i> offers a new area of research for academics and scholars, in terms of impact and outcome assessment for large scale social benefits. It holds great significance for study as a subject matter in the social sciences.

(Source: Researcher's compilation)

The first day of the fair begins with offering prayers to their revered one followed by a common meal for everybody including the royal members. The second day is reserved exclusively for the barter practice where the people from the hills and plains exchange different spices, edible items and other traditional goods. The final day is meant for tax collection from the sellers after the trade is over followed by community fishing by everyone.

Table 3: Major task areas in *Jonbeel Mela*

Task Area	Description
Invitation	Invitations to the villages in the neighbouring regions are sent in a traditional manner by sending a <i>Tamul</i> and <i>Paan</i> (betel nut and leaf) to every village, especially in the border areas of Assam.
Tax collection	The collection of tax from the people of the villages under the <i>Gobha</i> king is one of the important purposes of this fair. The existing king, authorises some of the members of the royal heritage to do this.
Meal arrangement	In view of the fair, arranging a community feast where the king and the subjects can have a meal, thereby furthering the bond between the community and the king, is another task area that is specially looked into.
Receiving the King	The king resides in the hills, and comes down to the plains where the fair is held. Receiving the king is a significant ritualistic task assigned to another sub-committee.
Spinning	A special mat, known as the <i>Dhari</i> is specially woven every year by the weavers from Meghalaya, for the king to sit upon on the occasion of <i>Jonbeel Mela</i> .
Promotion	A community event seldom engages in marketing or promotional activities. Nevertheless, basic news and information about the event is spread through the leading dailies of the state and also through television.
Venue management	The fair is held in an area measuring more than 5 acres of land which is managed by the committee members near the <i>Jonbeel</i> lake at <i>Morigaon</i> district of Assam. Setting up the space or venue for such a huge area is a challenging task, which in comparison to the growing number of participants and attendees to the event needs to be further expanded.
Finance	Finance for the event is taken care of solely by the committee members through self-managed finance.

Source: Field Study, 2017

The fair is a celebration of the traditional heritage of the *Tiwas* and an occasion of merry making with a view to grow better relations between the people from the hills and plains. The management process involves the basic management functions and activities starting right from planning till control and coordinating. Since it is an annual event, the need for creative or novel concepts for the event is minimal, but efforts to better plan out the fair are constant. Further, the functions of organising, staffing and directing are also evident since the whole event is driven by man power as allotted and directed by the organising committee. Also, in regard to control measures, adequate security arrangements are made taking note of the law and order requirements. The state tourism department has also shown interest in the event in terms of financial aids and grants, especially for securing a permanent and bigger venue for the fair. However apart from the financial aid, the state has not intervened much in the event, letting the fair remain a community affair and the traditions intact. Several international tourists come to witness this fair thus enabling to boost tourism in the state.

SUMMARY FINDINGS:

As revealed by the literature reviewed, events carry tremendous potential to accelerate the tourism industry. The experience of attending an event can be targeted for boosting a destination's tourism. Whether it is in the form of a corporate event, or a wedding or even a conference, events help to showcase a destination to the travellers and tourists. Events are important since it can accelerate tourist inflow to destinations where tourism is dictated by seasons. Tourism industry across the globe has started pitching upon events to revitalise the economy. Events help to showcase the culture and traditions of a destination thereby creating a new niche in the tourism map. Community based events involve mass participation of the community and act as a platform for displaying their rich cultural heritage. As such they provide a major opportunity to the host community and the destination for attracting global tourists. However, what is essential at the present hour is the focus of event management practitioners and the state towards presenting these events on the tourism stage keeping intact the very essence of community beliefs and values. There are several stakeholders to an event, and a community based event like *Jonbeel Mela* also has different stakeholders to it. Starting from the extended family of the *Tiwa* and *Gobha* royal clan, it involves the local community and ethnic tribes, the organisers, residents, the government and the tourism industry, the media, academics and researchers, and the society at large. Additionally, other independent interested group who may have an interest in the event includes the environment activists, the political parties and other industrialists. *Jonbeel Mela* enables the strengthening of community bonds and building a sense of pride. Further, it also facilitates the generation of social capital.

In regard to the third objective it is found that the entire responsibility of managing the *Jonbeel Mela* is taken up by a committee specifically established for the purpose and as directed by the royal family. Though it basically comprises of the descendants of the royal families of the *Gobha* and *Tiwa* kings, currently other people who are not a part of the lineage have also joined in to work for the event. The management consists of division of work amongst different members based on major task areas. State support in the form of financial aid towards the event is a recent development, prior to which the whole of the three day fair was financed by the committee members themselves. The *Jonbeel Mela* currently is challenged by the space constraint since the event is growing in size every year in terms of participants and attendees and also by the fear of acculturation and commercialisation resulting in loss of culture and traditions.

CONCLUSION:

(Getz, 2008) highlights the importance of event management as “a fast growing professional field in which tourists constitute a potential market for planned events and the tourism industry has become a vital stakeholder in their success and attractiveness” (p.403). Different events enable to boost the tourists' inflow to destinations characterized by a seasonal tourism industry. Of all the different forms of events, community based festivals and events stand out as unique experiences, especially in terms of projecting an altogether new culture for the tourists. These events are special by nature since they can be distinctly associated with a specific culture and tradition related to a geographical region. Further they

are the outcome of large scale community involvement, as observed in the present case of *Jonbeel Mela* of Assam. Though it is community centric by nature, *Jonbeel Mela* contains immense benefits for diverse stakeholders. Both socio-cultural and economic impacts are inherent in the community based events. Community events and festivals help to distribute information and knowledge of the cultural heritage. Adequate interests of the state or the policy makers along with the participation of event managers would enable the mobilising of the event outcomes for the society at large. Felsenstein & Fleischer (2003) also states promotion of a festival as a tourist attraction usually means public sector assistance. Infusing effective management practices in the whole course of managing the event would enable better use of resources and also ensure the adequate participation of the stakeholders and their rightful outcomes. Further, appropriate event management attempts to manage *Jonbeel Mela* can result in transforming this community event into a major festival of the state followed by global recognition. However, more research and measures on the part of the state, academics and industry is crucial to attain this objective.

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