

# Tourism Development in Dibang Valley, Anini: Future Prospects and Challenges

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**Abstract:** Dibang valley a pristine natural serenity surrounded by snowcapped mountains, meandering gorge rivers, diverse flora and fauna and also known as the 'Valley of Waterfalls' was awarded with the Best Offbeat Mountain Destination at the Outlook Traveller Awards 2024, the 17th Annual Convention of the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOI) in 2025. This paper examines the multifaceted opportunities and obstacles concerning the advancement of tourism in the Dibang Valley, Anini, a region characterized by its rich biodiversity and distinct tribal heritage. The analysis encompasses current infrastructural developments and government initiatives aimed at fostering sustainable and community-centric tourism models within Arunachal Pradesh, thereby offering insights applicable to the Dibang Valley. Specifically, this study will critically evaluate the potential for ecotourism and cultural tourism, while simultaneously addressing the environmental impact, logistical constraints, and socio-economic considerations inherent in developing such a remote yet pristine destination. Further, it will explore how active local community participation and robust policy frameworks can mitigate negative perceptions and foster inclusive growth in emerging tourism destinations. The inherent challenges in establishing robust tourism infrastructure in geographically isolated areas like Dibang Valley necessitate strategic planning to overcome accessibility issues and ensure the provision of essential services for visitors.

**Keywords:** Tourism, pristine, meandering, multifaceted, diversity, heritage, environment, ecotourism, cultural tourism, challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the fundamentals to the sustainable socio-economic development of any state or nations in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. It can boom the micro-macro level of economy and can add to societal development. This study critically examines the nascent tourism landscape within Dibang Valley, Anini, an ecologically sensitive and culturally rich district in Arunachal Pradesh, India. The region, characterized by its pristine Himalayan environment and predominance of Idu-Mishmi community, presents significant opportunities for sustainable tourism development, yet it simultaneously faces considerable challenges related to infrastructure, accessibility, and potential socio-cultural impacts. This paper aims to explore the current state, future prospects, and multifaceted challenges associated with tourism growth in this distinct region, particularly considering its remote location and unique socio-ecological

dynamics. A key focus will be on evaluating the potential for regenerative tourism models that prioritize community empowerment and the preservation of Indigenous cultural heritage, distinguishing it from conventional tourism approaches that often lead to environmental degradation and cultural erosion. Specifically, this analysis will delve into how indigenous tourism, by directly involving native populations in managing their destinations and showcasing their unique cultures, can foster socio-economic development and ensure the sustainability of cultural resources within Dibang Valley. Such an approach emphasizes the active participation of local residents in decision-making processes, which is crucial for mitigating potential conflicts of interest and ensuring equitable distribution of tourism benefits.

Dibang Valley district is the largest (9,129 sq. km) and least populated district in Arunachal Pradesh, India, located in the eastern Himalayas. It is known for its extreme, untouched wilderness, high-altitude lakes, and deep river gorges. Headquartered in Anini, this remote region is dominated by the Idu Mishmi tribe and is a hotspot for biodiversity, including rare mammals like the Mishmi Takin and the Mishmi giant flying squirrel etc. It is located in the northeastern most corner of India, bordering Tibet and China. The district is geographically split into the Upper Dibang Valley (mountainous and remote) and the Lower Dibang Valley (foothills and plains).

The valley is the ancestral home of the Idu Mishmi tribe, a community known for its deep spiritual connection to nature and its tradition of considering tigers as their siblings. It is a global biodiversity hotspot, home to rare species like the Mishmi Takin, Red Panda, and the newly discovered Mishmi Giant Flying Squirrel. Anini, the district headquarters, is perched on a picturesque plateau and serves as the primary base for trekking and exploring the upper valley. Due to its extreme terrain, the district has a low density of roads and is often cut off during the monsoon season due to landslides.

This article will synthesize existing literature on indigenous tourism and sustainable development, complemented by a qualitative investigation into the perceptions and aspirations of Dibang Valley's local communities, including their perspectives on resource management and cultural representation. This framework will elucidate how a community-led approach can mitigate the risks

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of commercialization and cultural dilution often associated with external tourism agencies.

## 2. Methodology

This section outlines the research design and empirical approaches employed to investigate the multifaceted aspects of tourism development in the Dibang Valley, focusing on both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques.

Specifically, the methodological framework will incorporate mixed methods, utilizing surveys to quantify perceptions and economic impacts while employing semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations to capture nuanced sociocultural dynamics and indigenous knowledge systems. This approach aims to generate a holistic understanding of local perspectives, encompassing both tangible economic considerations and intangible cultural values essential for sustainable tourism planning. The integration of these diverse data streams will facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities for tourism development in the region, particularly emphasizing the interplay between indigenous entrepreneurship and sustainable resource management.

## 3. Results

The findings will present a detailed analysis of the current state of tourism infrastructure, visitor demographics, and the economic contributions of existing tourism activities to local livelihoods. Furthermore, the research will quantitatively and qualitatively assess the sociocultural impacts, including shifts in traditional practices, changes in community cohesion, and the influence on local identity due to increased tourist interaction. The results will also identify prevalent challenges faced by tourism stakeholders, such as inadequate infrastructure and market access, alongside opportunities for sustainable growth and diversification of tourism products. This will involve an in-depth examination of potential ecotourism ventures and cultural heritage interpretations, leveraging indigenous knowledge systems for authentic visitor experiences while ensuring community empowerment and environmental stewardship.

### A. Present Status

Geographically, Dibang valley district is known for the remotest location from the mainland India and sharing the international boundary with Tibet and China on the northern margin. Despite being transportational and communication bottleneck, Anini (Hq.) flourishing much away from rest part of the tourist centres of North East India. Dibang valley known as 'Valley of Waterfalls' was awarded with the Best Offbeat Mountain Destination at the Outlook Traveller Awards 2024, the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOI) in 2025. Anini achieved this status due multifaceted reasons such as snowcapped mountains, unexplored natural landscape, rivers and rivulets, diversified flora and fauna; and most importantly the decent hospitality of local people fascinate the area making it a top destination for adventure, ecotourism and birdwatching and other sporting

events.

In the recent few past years, the local youths have started promoting the tourism in manifolds by engaging themselves in various activities like trekking, kayaking, birding, cultural activities and by running the homestays, resorts; hotels and motels etc. The very famous trekking adventure known as *Seven Lakes Trekking by Emmudu (SKY) Trekkers* facilitate all the logistic support to the visitors. It is situated along the Mathu valley well known for its pristine unexplored natural landscape, vegetation and other flora and fauna species. This trekking expedition started in the year 2020 (As per one of the respondents from the team) as marking the first inception of a visionary trekking route in Dibang valley. Followed by whitewater Kayaking or Rafting adventure operating on the Dri river by the youths which attracts outsiders and locals every year.

The famous *Chigu Camp* located approximately 47 km from Anini (Hq.) along the Dri river valley became a hotspot very recently after its first opening in the year late 2023 as a tourist destination. This is one of the most attracting tourist spots along the Dri river valley as it is followed by various waterfalls, rivulets, alpine vegetation and diversities of flora and fauna. The mighty Dri river presents a meandering drainage pattern exhibits both soft and hard intensity of flow as it passes through varied nature of stream ordering and high altitude which attract the tourist from the outside. It is followed by uncountable numbers of major and minor waterfalls mostly are perennial in nature.

The recent development of *Aeyo Valley trekking expedition* is newly explored, pristine, trekking destination along the upper ridges of Dri river valley, known for untouched forest, waterfalls, and glacier lakes. It offers high altitude treks featuring, and is considered a raw, remote alternative to the popular tourist sites. It involves 3-7 days of hiking through dense, old-growth forests, passing cascading waterfalls and rocky terrain, often requiring camping in tents. The area is remote and requires organized trip with local guides, often arranged by agencies like *Finderbrideg, Encamp Adventures or Deeuwru Trekking & Adventure Club*. It is described as a 'hidden soul' of Arunachal Pradesh, with minimal tourist footfall and mostly untouched landscapes, offering a 360-degree experience of wild nature. Mishmi Takin, Red Panda and Flying Squirrels are rare wild animal species often sighted along the entire stretch of *Aeyo valley*.

The recent development of *Mattu waterfall camp site* which exhibits the combination of both man and nature creation stand tall in the field tourism development in Dibang valley district of Arunachal Pradesh. The natural beauty of waterfall is ornamented with some of the man-made features like *glass suspension bridge or Sky Walk bridge*, Roller Coaster and the tourist complex adding new attractions to one of the most scenic beauties of the district

The first, historic joint civil-military expedition to the sacred Athu-popu site in Dibang Valley along the Tan~lo valley was organized on September 1, 2021. Led by mountaineer Tine Mena, this 17-day trek was designed to explore the sacred site of the Idu Mishmi tribe and promote adventure cum cultural

tourism. Athu-popu is considered by the Idu Mishmi tribe to be a mythical gateway for departed souls located near the Indo-China border (*keya pass*). Following the success of the first annual treks (such as the 2022 and 2025 expeditions) have been conducted to strengthen civil-military relations and celebrate local culture to further promotion of tourism in the valley. The Dibang valley district of Arunachal Pradesh is endowed with mystical natural environment and untapped resources offers multidimensional prospects of tourism development in the region.

#### 4. Multifaceted Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite being awarded with Best Offbeat Mountain Destination at the Outlook Traveller Awards 2024, the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOI) in 2025, the entire upper Dibang region faces numerous challenges in multidimensional ways. The very pertinent of them are such as:

##### A. Road Connectivity

Highways and roadways are the fundamentals to develop tourism in any particular area. In the absence of proper road and highways, the accessibility of an area is always hampered. In the matter of road connectivity, Dibang valley is lagging far behind from rest part of the world. The rugged terrains and the excessive rainfall in the state as a whole and Dibang valley in particular always creates lots of problems for the travellers and visitors who wish to visit far flung areas of Arunachal Pradesh. During Monsoon Season, a single road remains cutoff from rest part of the world. Presently only one National Highways of Two Lane (NH 313) plays a lifeline to the people of Dibang valley and other visitors

##### B. Excessive Rainfall and Short Visiting Season

Geographically, is lying in the sub-tropical region of India which is just above the Tropic of Cancer. Its geographical location makes it a region of very high rainfall. At the same time entire Arunachal Pradesh is affected by the extremity of Monsoon rains. The state receives very high and incessant rainfall throughout the year. There are very few rainless months (November to February). Due to the incessant rainfalls, most of the non-metallic roads are not motorable during rainy seasons. Moreover, landslides and mudflows often create road blockages and also lead to accidents.

##### C. Lack of Infrastructure and Communication

Network Infrastructure is the key element which boosts the growth of tourism in an area. If the varied infrastructure facilities are improved, the potential tourist number may be increased but it will be minimized if the infrastructures are not enough to meet the need of tourists. Accessibility, accommodation, amenities and ancillary services are the major key infrastructures which need to be developed in tourist areas. Accessibility is one of the main infrastructures among all the socio-economic factors. To develop tourism in an area, the tourist centre must be easily accessible by various modes of transports, e.g. roads, railways, air and waterways. Several

potential places of tourist attraction are yet to connect with the proper road accessibility and other amenities.

##### D. Lack of Proper Management of Fund

The recent empirical research and through different modes of investigation, it is observed that there is existence of gross mismanagement of fund specifically meant for the tourism development in the region. The selective approach of fund provision leads to inequality in selection among the potential youths of the community. This gap of disparity in funds and schemes distribution by the concern authorities may cause serious concern among the youths and may hamper in the tourism development in the region.

##### E. Inner Line Permit

Any tourist from India and abroad other than Arunachal Pradesh coming to region has to obtain an Inner Line Permit or permit from the external affairs ministry, GOI because the state comes under restricted area. An Inner Line Permit for Indians and a Protected Area Permit (PAP) for foreigners is required for entering into Arunachal Pradesh. In many instances, getting ILP or PAP often discourages the tourists. Since, the ILP system is for the security and protection of the indigenous people, online application with simpler methods can be adopted to ease in getting permission.

##### F. Lack of Local Participation

Till today, local people are very much unaware of tourism industry and they are also completely ignorant about the opportunities which are created by tourism sector. In many places, civic senses are also ignored completely by the local denizens. Due to this ignorance, there are very less cooperation from the denizens towards the tourism development. Local inhabitants are very hospitable but they are not so open towards the strangers. Very recently, the local youths played a very pivotal role in the development of tourism in the region. Some of them found to be engaged in various activities but many are quite unaware and less interested in the field.

##### G. Reciprocal Hospitality

Hospitality is a vital constituent of tourism promotion and development for any region of the world. There must exist the equal reciprocity in behaviour and treatment from both host and visitors. In recent news via social media (Facebook, WhatsApp etc.), a very heated argument between the host and visitors was noticed at Mishmi Hills and Resort, Anini. The argument began with the denial behaviour of the visitors to follow the rules and regulations of the resort. Apart from the regulations of the administration, every hotel and resort frame certain rules and regulation for the proper function as well as security of the hotels and working staff. There are other instances of such incident took place in the past years. So, there must exist the reciprocal hospitality from both giving and taking end for safer and conducive tourism environment.

#### 5. Prospects

Dibang valley possesses great physical and cultural diversities. Due to its vast geographical and cultural diversities,

the scope of tourism industry is very high. To harness the tourism potential of the area the government and the indigenous people have to join hands together. Tourism industry is truly a sector which can enhance the all-round prosperity of the state. Some of the major prospects of tourism may be noted as under:

#### A. Rich Flora and Fauna

Dibang valley falls under Dibang wildlife Sanctuary and is blessed with the verities of flora and fauna. Its biodiversity is so large and the forests are so diversified that it is one of the "Biodiversity Hot Spots" in the state. Its 80.5 % area is forested. Forest offers lots of opportunities to the researchers/scientists as well as to the visitors. The forests of Dibang valley are also famous for great verities of orchid species. More than 100s of orchid species are found here. Realizing, the potential of orchids in floriculture and endangered, an orchid sanctuary can be established here in Dibang region. Dibang valley is the home of three species of leopards i.e., spotted leopard, clouded leopard and snow leopard. Major animal species found in the area are Royal Bengal Tigers, Red panda, Mishmi Takin, Himalayan Black Bear, flying squirrels etc. Apart from these, there are also other varieties of wildlife including a majestic mammal called Mithun (*Bos frontalis*); Mishmi monal, Tragopan and the exclusive species of primates found in Arunachal). In addition, the region is also home to two endangered feline species-golden cat and marbled cat. Besides, there are some bugs, butterflies, moths, worms and mushrooms which are rare and endemic. Their presence boosted the growth of visitors who are coming here for scientific study and research on these insects and plants. The region being a unique geographical area is naturally blessed with diverse topography and changing altitudes. The climatic conditions depend on altitude have created a wildlife population that is diverse as well as precious.

#### B. Cultural diversity

The Idu-Mishmi tribe is one of the sub tribes of Mishmi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. Culturally, Idus is very rich and potential to lead the other tribes for preservation and promotion at the world level. Their uniqueness in belief and faith rendered them to carryover the ancestral culture. Reh is one of the festivals celebrated across the Idu dominated area in the state which showcase the value of traditions and rituals. The most colourful and well-designed attire with multipattern costumes is still preserved by the community members. *Igu* system (Spiritual performance), is recognised as one of the complicated and lengthiest verse of shamanic ritual system. The food habit and farming system is generally traditional in predominance. The hunting and fishing still prevail largely among the community members. So much of dependency on forest resources for edible items, construction materials etc. This multifaceted culture and tradition in one way unique in itself and can be potential for attracting the outside visitors.

#### C. Scenic Beauty & Natural Landscapes

Because of the beautiful natural sceneries and scintillating picturesque landscapes the whole Dibang valley can be considered as 'Natural Paradise'. Dibang valley is blessed with

several mighty rivers- Dree, Mathu, Tan~lo, Emmra and numerous tributaries. The Snow-capped Mountains and glaciers in the higher altitudes of region always catch the eyes of the visitors. The lakes and waterfalls ornamented the whole region more stunningly with affective and potential to attract the visitors.

#### D. Adventure Tourism

Apart from sightseeing, the natural landscapes are also providing many adventurous activities for the adventure tourism. Mountaineering, skydiving, mountain car racing, rafting, skiing, surfing, rowing, paragliding, roping, etc. can be developed to a greater level. Outsiders are also performing variety of less risky adventure activities like fishing, safari adventure, angling, Mushroom & Rock specimen collection, etc. Adventure tourism understood in terms of daring games and sports activities constitutes the core of tourism in state as whole. Many high snow-capped virgin mountains are here which offers mountaineering and rock climbing. Due to safety issues and inadequate medical infrastructures, most of these potentials are untapped. The rivers like Dree, Mathu, Tan~lo, Emmra are very fast flowing rivers which offers challenges and adventures to the tourists in terms of whitewater kayaking or rafting. Apart from the present limited adventuring development, the Dibang valley region endowed with high potential of future tourist attracting centres if properly nurtured and developed.

#### E. Pilgrimage Tourism Development

Like other districts, Dibang valley is also known for indigenous pilgrimage expedition popularly called as Athu-popu expedition. Athu-popu is located near China border (Keya pass) along the Tan~lo valley which is traditionally famous as a holy rock of Idu-Mishmi. Mythologically, this huge rock is believed to be a place where the great priest (shaman) *Sinewru* landed and cried for an hours after he heard about the death of his mother while he was on journey for many months. The rock standing on the hillslope oozes a form of liquid is believed to be tears of great priest *Sinewru*. The mythology is passed on from generation to generation and it became more popular among the younger generation.

#### F. Role of Host Community

Tourism can develop and grow when host community generates a friendly and positive attitude toward it and when they see their role in the process of the tourism development. A good relationship between local hosts and tourist is essential for the long-term development of tourism in the whole state. Although, the Arunachalee look at the strangers with suspicious, yet the people here are very helpful and kind hearted. These days, local people developed a positive mind set and friendly attitudes towards the visitors. Moreover, they support and cooperates the Government to organize several events related to the promotion of tourism. They enact a separate law, mostly included in customary laws, for the security and safety of tourists and tourist sites. The locals are also involving in tour and travel agencies for the betterment of tourism by providing traveling and lodging services to the

visitors. Some of them are engaged themselves as Tourists Guide. Many students and volunteers, voluntarily provide free guide services to the tourist. The tour guides are well-versed in English and Hindi languages to communicate the visitors.

## 6. Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of Dibang Valley's tourism potential underscores the intricate balance required between economic development and ecological preservation, advocating for a model rooted in Indigenous self-determination and regenerative principles.

It highlights the necessity of participatory decision-making processes, where local communities, particularly Indigenous groups, are integral to shaping tourism policies and practices. This includes ensuring equitable benefit distribution and safeguarding cultural heritage from undue commercialization. This approach aligns with the principles of regenerative tourism, which leverages Indigenous ontologies and local knowledge to restore and protect ecosystems while fostering community well-being. This framework recognizes that cultural preservation is an intrinsically co-created process within Indigenous communities, evolving through intergenerational dialogue and thereby ensuring the sustainability and meaningfulness of cultural revival within a tourism context.

Therefore, future research should explore the specific socio-economic and ecological indicators best suited for measuring the efficacy of regenerative tourism initiatives in the Dibang Valley, considering the unique biodiversity and cultural landscape of the region. Further investigation into the integration of Indigenous values and wisdom within leisure and tourism experiences is crucial for identifying viable avenues for regeneration in the Dibang Valley, moving beyond conventional sustainability metrics. This would involve

examining how a kinship-based approach, rather than one solely focused on customer numbers and revenue, can be operationalized to support sustainable Indigenous tourism and connect future generations.

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