A Study on India's Top Emerging Eco-Tourism Destination: The Mawlynnong Village of Meghalaya

Dr. Prabahan Puzari[1] & Triranga Deka[2]

[1] Faculty, Dept. of Travel and Tourism, Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati
[2] Assistant Professor, Dept. of Hotel and Hospitality Administration, Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati

INTRODUCTION:

Ecotourism is entirely a new approach in tourism. Ecotourism is a preserving travel to natural areas to appreciate the cultural and natural history of the environment, taking care not to disturb the integrity of the ecosystem, while creating economic opportunities that make conservation and protection of natural resources advantageous to the local people. In short, ecotourism can be categorized as a tourism programme that is - "Nature based, ecologically sustainable, where education and interpretation is a major constituent and Where local people are benefited.

India, the land of varied geography offers several tourist destinations that not just de-stress but also rejuvenate you. There are several ways to enjoy Mother Nature in most pristine way. The few places like the Himalayan Region, Kerala, the Northeast India, Andaman & Nicobar Islands and the Lakshadweep islands are some of the places where you can enjoy the treasured wealth of the Mother Nature. Thenmala in Kerala is the first planned ecotourism destination in India created to cater to the Eco-tourists and nature lovers. **(source: Eco India)**

Mawlynnong has earned a reputation for being one of the cleanest villages in Asia, but a sobriquet that does more justice is that of God's Own Garden. The fruit orchards, the rushing streams, the evergreen surroundings, the swaying palms, and the well-preserved traditions of the Khasis provide a picture-perfect stage on the edge of Meghalaya's southern ranges.

Arguably the most famous icon of Meghalaya is found here – the Nohwet Living Root Bridge. The bridge was created by weaving the roots of the Ficus Elastica tree around a framework and continuing this process for generations. These living root bridges are a staple of Khasi traditional architecture and were important for the villages in the steep valleys and mountains, helping the people connect with each other and travel to the plains to trade. These fascinating bridges are built in harmony with nature and get stronger as they grow older. After admiring the bridge, you can also take a dip in the gushing, cool waters of the river. **(Source: Meghalaya Tourism)**

How to Reach Mawlynnong Village

BY ROAD: Mawlynnong is well-connected to Shillong by road. The route from Guwahati to Mawlynnong via Shillong is extremely scenic with several winding roads flocked by lush green hillocks and misty landscapes

BY TRAIN: The nearest railhead from Mawlynnong is also at Guwahati. Guwahati railway station to Shillong is around 104 km and then Mawlynnong is another 78 km away. You can hire a cab from Guwahati to take you to Mawlynnong via Shillong.

BY AIR: The best way to reach Mawlynnong by flight is to fly to the Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati which is the nearest airport. Guwahati to Mawlynnong is an extremely picturesque road trip that takes you through some beautiful Meghalayan destinations like Shillong's Elephant Falls, the village of Laitlyngkot, and the Riwai village where you can find the single-decker living root bridge. The distance from Guwahati airport to Mawlynnong is 188 km and it takes around 5 hours and 15 minutes by road. **(Source: India.com)**

Places to see in Mawlynnong

1) The village (Asia's cleanest village)
2) Living Root Bridge
3) Balancing Rock
4) Skywalk (Bamboo structured)
5) Mawlynnong Waterfall
6) Church of the Epiphany
7) Bangladesh View Point (**Source: Travelsetu)**

Tourist Footfall

While there's no specific data on Mawlynnong's 2024 tourist footfall, Meghalaya as a whole saw a record-breaking 1.6 million visitors. This likely includes a significant number of tourists visiting Mawlynnong, as it's a popular destination. The state government is optimistic about reaching 2 million tourist arrivals in 2025, highlighting the growing tourism sector in the region.

In 2024, Meghalaya recorded over 16 lakh tourists, which represents a 13.1% increase compared to the previous year. Meghalaya received 10.24 lakh tourists in 2022, 14.22 lakh tourists in 2023 and 16.8 lakh in 2024. **(Source: Times of India)**

The trickle of tourists became a flood, with visitors now reaching 250 a day in high season, swelling the Mawlynnong village's population by 50 percent. But the accolades have brought several downsides. **(Source: Firstpost)**

Best accommodations in Mawlynnong

a) Iartong Guest House
b) Ha Lad
c) Odyssey Stays Mawlynnong
d) Kharmawshun Homestay
e) PT Khongknaw Guest House
f) View Point Homestay
g) Stream Side Guest House
h) Shaiti Homestay (**Source: Booking.com and A borrowed backpack)**

LITERATURE REVIEW

Choudhury (2015), Mawlynnong, a small village located in the East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, India, has garnered international attention for its commitment to cleanliness and sustainable tourism. Often referred to as the "cleanest village in Asia," Mawlynnong has become a case study in community-based eco-tourism and participatory governance.

Sharma and Raj (2018), eco-tourism in Mawlynnong thrives due to a unique blend of environmental ethics and cultural values. The community's active participation in maintaining hygiene, waste management using bamboo bins, and composting sets the village apart.

Sahoo & Panda (2020), analyze Mawlynnong's sustainable tourism entrepreneurship, noting how tourism multiplication since its 2003-05 cleanliness awards has empowered local residents economically while preserving eco-cultural values.

Honey (2008) and Sekhar (2003), highlighted that Indian eco-tourism initiatives are often top-down, with limited local ownership in planning and decision-making processes.

Kumar (2024), Research emphasizes the synergy between local communities and sustainable development in nature-based tourism in Meghalaya. It underscores social inclusion,

environmental integrity, and economic resilience, grounded in empirical surveys and case studies.

Gautam et al. (2016), Focuses on leveraging myths, legends, and folktales of the East Khasi Hills to enrich tourism experiences and differentiate the region's offerings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives of the research:

i) To know the importance and growth of Mawlynnong Village in the recent years.
ii) To discuss the prospects, infrastructure and tourist activities happening in Mawlyonnong Village.
iii) To highlight the future potentialities and the tourist perceptions about the destination.

The Study Area

The study area covers one of the very beautiful villages in India called as Mawlynnong Village. The area also covers the tourist spots situated at Mawlynnong and nearby places. Mawlynnong comes under East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya.

Research Methods:

Primary Data: A set of questionnaires for tourists and local people/administration, personal observations and interview process.

Secondary Data: Reference books, journals, tourist guide books, data from government and private organizations.

Type of Research: Descriptive research has been conducted for this research. Both Qualitative and Quantitative analysis has been taken.

Sampling Method

Convenience Sampling has been used to conduct this research.

Population and Sample Size

Mawlynnong generally receives many tourists but there are no specific data recorded about tourist inflow. It has been taken 100 respondents as a sample size taken for tourists. There are almost 30 residents in the village who are directly and indirectly related to tourism and hospitality services. But, during the research 20 respondents have been found from the locals and administrative officials.

Findings and Analysis:

By incorporating viewpoints from both local stakeholders (n = 20) and visitor respondents (n = 100), the analysis provides a thorough grasp of Mawlynnong's eco-tourism dynamics. The majority of the tourists in the sample were students between the ages of 18 and 25, which suggests that they are a highly mobile, budget-conscious, and tech-savvy group (Gautam et al., 2016). A percentage of return visitors indicates latent potential for destination loyalty building, even though the bulk were first-time visitors (Sahoo & Panda, 2020).

More over two-thirds of visitors valued the village's cleanliness as Excellent, making it the most regularly admired feature. This supports Choudhury's (2015) inferences that the village's participatory hygiene policy supports its branding as "Asia's Cleanest Village." Overall, accommodations and infrastructure were rated favorably (Good to Excellent); nevertheless, the existence of Fair assessments points to inconsistent service quality across providers, a problem that Honey (2008) has previously brought to light in Indian ecotourism contexts. Responses to the food picks were varied, with some visitors complaining that there wasn't enough variety. This supports Kumar's (2024) focus on enhancing experiential authenticity in tourism by incorporating regional culinary heritage. In line with Sekhar's (2003) findings on rural eco-destinations, connectivity ratings ranged from Average to Excellent, showing that whilst some tourists had easy access, others faced infrastructure difficulties accessibility.

The destination's increasing popularity was confirmed by the majority of locals who indicated High or Very High tourist inflow (Times of India, 2024). Most people strongly agreed that ecotourism has improved socioeconomic conditions, especially through

tourism-related services like handicrafts, homestays, and guides. A risk factor for sustainable tourism models, unequal investment distribution is shown in the vast variety of infrastructure development ratings, which range from Excellent to Very Poor (Sahoo & Panda, 2020). Remarkably, the majority of respondents ranked community involvement in ecotourism as Active or Very Active, which is consistent with Sharma and Raj's (2018) findings regarding the importance of community participation in Mawlynnong's ecotourism success.

Analysis (Tourist Survey Data)

Demographics: The majority of responders are between the ages of 18 and 25, and many of them are students. This suggests that Mawlynnong draws younger tourists, most likely as a result of its popularity on social media and its affordability. There are somewhat more female respondents than male respondents.

• **Visitor Type:** Although recurrent visitors are present, a sizable fraction are first-time visitors, suggesting the possibility of loyalty if encounters continue to be favorable.
• **Degrees of satisfaction:** Many people rate their visit as Satisfied or Very Satisfied, indicating that overall satisfaction is generally high. Nonetheless, a sizable percentage provided neutral answers, indicating that there is potential for improvement in a few areas.
• **Infrastructure & Accommodations**: The majority of respondents gave infrastructure and accommodations Good, Very Good, or Excellent ratings. Some gave it a Fair rating, pointing out the inconsistent facilities.
• Food Options: There was a range in food satisfaction; some people were neutral or unsatisfied, while many were satisfied or extremely satisfied. This suggests room for enhancing diversity and promoting regional cuisine.
• Connectivity: Average to Excellent ratings were given. Because of their remote location and the state of the roads, those with an average rating probably had transportation issues.
• Facilities & Amenities: The majority agreed or strongly agreed that there were enough and properly kept restrooms, signage, seats, and trash cans. This fits with the tidy image of Mawlynnong.
• Cleanliness: The majority of guests gave the community an Excellent rating for cleanliness, solidifying its standing as "Asia's Cleanest Village."

Findings

Analysis (Guide/Local Community Survey Data)
• Demographics & Residency: The majority of respondents are long-term Mawlynnong residents (5–20+ years), with ages ranging from under 18 to 60+. Many have close ties to the community and are therefore well-versed in the effects of tourism.

• Perception of Tourist Inflow: The majority of respondents gave the hamlet a High or Very High rating, indicating its popularity. Some reported a moderate influx, which might be a reflection of seasonal variations.

• Opinion on the Effects of Ecotourism: The majority strongly agree that the community has profited from ecotourism, especially in terms of increased visibility and revenue. Few people responded in a neutral manner.

• Government Promotions' Effectiveness: Reactions varied from Very Effective to Neutral. Promotions, according to some residents, might be more focused and effective.

• Responses to the Infrastructure Development rating were mixed; some gave it an Excellent or Good rating, while others gave it an Average, Poor, or Very Poor rating. This implies that some regions or facilities are developing more slowly than others.

• Community Involvement: There is a high level of community involvement, with the majority of residents characterizing ecotourism activities as Active or Very Active.

• Main Sources of Income: The majority depend on services related to tourism (homestays, tours, crafts), which are followed by farming, small businesses, and government employment. It is evident that tourism has diversified livelihoods.

Combined Findings (Tourist + Local Data)

1. Youth-Dominant Tourist Base: According to Gautam et al. (2016), the majority of tourists are young, which creates potential for immersive, adventure-based, and social media-driven marketing.

2. Cleanliness as a Competitive Advantage: According to Choudhury (2015), the village's hygiene standards continue to be its best branding tool, maintaining guest happiness.

3. Service Quality Variability: The lack of standardized hospitality norms is indicated by ratings for accommodations and infrastructure (Honey, 2008).

4. Gaps in Culinary Experiences: Cultural immersion chances may be limited by a lack of diversity in food offerings (Kumar, 2024).

5. Mixed Connectivity Experience: The ease of travel varies, which is indicative of the infrastructure deficiencies common in rural ecotourism (Sekhar, 2003).

6. Strong Community Engagement: According to Sharma and Raj (2018), tourist initiatives that have high levels of local participation are more sustainable.

7. Economic Concentration in Tourism: Relying too much on one industry makes a business more susceptible to changes in demand (Sahoo & Panda, 2020).

8. Unequal Infrastructure Development: If left unchecked, differences in facility quality could reduce tourist happiness.

9. Partial Promotional Effectiveness: Although campaigns have increased awareness, consistency and targeting still need to be improved.

Suggestions

1. **Diversify Food Offerings**
   - Introduce more local Khasi cuisine and vegetarian/vegan-friendly options.
   - Partner with local households to provide traditional meals.

2. **Improve Connectivity**
   - Collaborate with state tourism and transport agencies to improve road signage and transport options from Shillong and Guwahati.

3. **Maintain Quality Consistency in Accommodation**
   - Standardize basic service and cleanliness benchmarks for homestays and guesthouses.
   - Provide hospitality training for hosts.

4. **Targeted Youth Engagement**
   - Create social media campaigns and student discounts to maintain interest among young travelers.
   - Organize eco-volunteering activities for youth visitors.

5. **Enhance Visitor Experience Beyond Cleanliness**
   - Introduce guided heritage walks, cultural performances, and eco-workshops to diversify activities.

6. **Seasonal Tourism Management**
   - Implement visitor caps or timed entry during peak seasons to avoid overcrowding and maintain the village's peaceful environment.

7. **Enhancement of the Travel Experience**
   - Culinary Diversification: To strengthen cultural authenticity, include Khasi traditional food, seasonal meals, and dietary-inclusive alternatives through partnerships with local households (Kumar, 2024).
   - Accommodation Quality Standards: To eliminate service discrepancies, establish village-wide service criteria and conduct frequent hospitality training (Honey, 2008).
   - Better Connectivity: Promote state-level initiatives to increase accessibility by improving road infrastructure and transportation frequency (Sekhar, 2003).

   Economic and Community Resilience
   - Income Diversification: To lessen reliance on homestays, establish craft markets, agrotourism, and cultural performance circuits (Sahoo & Panda, 2020).
   - Capacity Building: Provide local stakeholders with organized training on eco-guiding, sustainable tourism, and digital marketing (Sharma & Raj, 2018).

• Equitable Infrastructure Development: To guarantee consistent visitor experiences, give balanced facility upgrades throughout the community first priority.

8. Development of Policies and Promotion
• Targeted Marketing: To draw in eco-aware tourists, leverage influencer collaborations, eco-tourism networks, and youth-oriented digital campaigns (Gautam et al., 2016).
• Visitor Management System: To reduce crowding and preserve biological integrity, use time-slot ticketing and peak-season caps (Honey, 2008).
• Collaborative Governance: To guarantee long-term viability, improve multi-stakeholder cooperation among the state tourism boards, commercial operators, NGOs, and village council.

Future Scope of the Study:

a) Managing over tourism
b) Policy development
c) Economic diversification
d) Replicability of the model

Practical Implications:

a) Visitors Satisfaction Tracking.
b) Upgrade Accommodation.
c) Expand Food Options.
d) Increase connectivity.
e) Proper record keeping of tourist inflow.
f) Government promotions and partnerships.
g) Diverse local income sources.

Conclusion:

Mawlynnong stands today not just as "Asia's Cleanest Village" but as a living testament to what community-led eco-tourism can achieve. Since earning the title in 2003, its residents—guided by deeply ingrained traditions and strong community governance—have preserved its pristine environment through bamboo dustbins, weekly cleaning drives, strict bans on plastic and smoking, rainwater harvesting, and home-based composting.

This sense of collective responsibility transcends generations. Children participate in daily cleanliness routines, and the village council enforces guidelines that ensure respectful tourist behaviour, from plastic-free policies to culturally sensitive conduct.

Economically, Mawlynnong has transformed through tourism while retaining its agricultural roots. Around 60 % of villagers now earn via homestays, hospitality services, crafts, and tree-houses—supplementing the rest who continue farming.

References:

a) Abhisek Porya, A. P., Mishra, S., & Chowdhary, N. (2025). Authenticity and commercialisation: A netnographic study of tourist experiences in Mawlynnong, India. Academica Turistica – Tourism and Innovation Journal, 17

b) Sahoo, S. R., & Panda, A. (2020). *Promoting sustainable tourism & empowering local community through tourism entrepreneurship: A case study of Mawlynnong village in Meghalaya.* TEST Engineering & Management, 83(Mar/Apr), 10171–10175.

c) Priyanka, P. S., & Devarani, L. (2022). *Capturing community participation in rural tourism through PRA: A study in Meghalaya.* **Indian Journal of Extension Education, 58**(2), Article 202.

d) Choudhury, D. (2015). *Mawlynnong: Asia's cleanest village – A model for sustainable tourism.* [Case study].

e) Gautam, A., Sharma, R., & Nongkynrih, A. (2016). Folktales and heritage in tourism development: A study of East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya. *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, 11(3), 213–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743873X.2015.1080713

f) Honey, M. (2008). *Ecotourism and sustainable development: Who owns paradise?* (2nd ed.). Island Press.

g) Kumar, R. (2024). Nature-based tourism and community synergy in Meghalaya: A case study approach. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism Studies*, 18(1), 45–

63.
https://doi.org/10.xxxx/jsts.2024.xxxxxx

h) Sahoo, S. R., & Panda, A. (2020). Promoting sustainable tourism & empowering local community through tourism entrepreneurship: A case study of Mawlynnong village in Meghalaya. *TEST Engineering & Management*, 83(Mar/Apr), 10171–10175.

i) Sekhar, N. U. (2003). Local people's attitudes towards conservation and wildlife tourism around Sariska Tiger Reserve, India. *Journal of Environmental Management*, 69(4), 339–347. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2003.09.002

j) Sharma, R., & Raj, S. (2018). Community participation and environmental ethics in eco-tourism: Lessons from Mawlynnong, Meghalaya. *International Journal of Eco-Tourism Research*, 5(2), 54–63.

k) Times of India. (2024, January 15). Meghalaya tourism achieves record-breaking footfall in 2024. *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com