

## **The historic Stilwell Road that leads to Kunming in China from Ledo in Assam**

While I was in Assam, I noted a number of different ways in which the enormous potential of Assam that was not being fully utilized, could be developed. My main focus was on the potential for certain types of tourism and for the village muga website. Clearly, Assam has a great underutilized tourist potential and this seemed to be recognized by those with whom I spoke. But it was unclear to me whether there was any strategy for developing it.

One recognized tourist potential is to partner with Kunming in China to attract those interested in World War II. It was mentioned to me that next year this was going to be undertaken. Before this could be done however, the travelling public has to be educated on the significance of Assam.

Unfortunately, everyone who knows anything about World War II in China/Asia knows about Kunming, the Flying Tigers, General 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell, etc. They know about the airlift "over the hump" to supply the forces in Kunming but they do not know where the flights began except that they originated somewhere in India. They also know about the various overland supply routes that were created but are unaware that one of these ran through Assam. Incidentally, I checked out my perceptions on this when I returned talking to historians who specialize in the military history of World War II. They seemed to know everything about Stilwell, Chiang Kai Chek, etc but could not definitively answer a single question that I put to them about Assam. Clearly this almost complete lack of knowledge about the role that Assam played in World War II must also be the case for the general public in UK and the US except for the those very few still living veterans who were stationed in Assam during the war, and some of their descendants.

This is an obstacle that has to be overcome. If an education and PR campaign can be carried out in advance of any major attempt to develop this tourism, then it can also be seen as an opportunity because so few have yet to trace this major historical event.

I recommended that prior to any expensive campaign to lure tourist interested in World War II (and there are lot of them — I know someone who every year takes a large number from one University in Texas to the European battlefields) that there needs to be a modest investment in public education. It is difficult to draw tourists to places about which they know nothing but it is not difficult to draw them to places about which they previously knew nothing but have learned something important. There is a need to induce historians (military and otherwise) and/or Asian specialists to come to Assam and visit important sites and investigate whatever archival documents are located in Assam or elsewhere in India. Research money is currently very tight in the US. Having a well-defined research project and some form of local support that allows limited funding to be more productive makes it easier to get research money. I can think of few project proposals where the case could be made that the subject has not been studied anywhere even remotely close to the degree warranted by its importance.

Assam could work with major academic professional organizations — possibly running an ad in their journals — offering to assist scholars to define an Assam research project proposal to be submitted for funding. Assam could offer local accommodations or least help an adequately funded scholar find them quickly at a reasonable rate. Transportation to appropriate sites could be provided or arranged and access to archival material could be arranged prior to their arrival.

This all can be more important than it appears as anyone who has done field research can testify that huge amounts of valuable potential research time is lost to the problems of settling into to an area and even more to getting access to data. Need I add that there are undoubtedly many fine scholars in Assamese institutions for whom some subsidized time off from their teaching and administrative duties and support of the kind indicated above could produce valuable scholarly and popular research and publications.

At least one person in the conference I attended in Guwahati, now living and working in the United States, indicated having contacts that would be helpful in publicizing Assam's many attractions for tourist. Certainly overseas Assamese would be a most valuable resource in helping to make Assam better known to the world community.

[Let me digress a bit here to add that the same model could be used to develop a knowledge base to provide potential tourists with information about the many other attractions of Assam. I am amazed at how many books on Asia, Asian history or British colonial history merely mention Assam in passing in a brief sentence or two about it being the place where the British first chose to grow tea in India. There is rarely if ever any mention of the early discovery of oil in Assam. In other words, Assam's importance to the British colonial/imperialist enterprise is simply glossed over.]

Academics would be primarily interested in publication in scholarly sources which would be helpful. A condition of the support for scholarly research would be the requirement that the researcher either share his or her material with a writer for more popular sources or even co-author popular pieces. More expensive but necessary is to follow on this research by bringing in travel writers, documentary filmmakers and travel agents to visit Assam. In addition to visiting potential tourist sites such as World War II airfields or wildlife preserves or tea plantations, they could be given lectures by scholars doing research on these subjects.

Bringing in travel agents and writers is absolutely essential for any major development as a tourist destination. Kunming, Assam's natural partner for those interested in World War II, has brought in a large number of travel agents and it has apparently paid off. (Someone mentioned to be about a planned scheduled flight between Guwahati and Kunming.) Because of online booking, travel agents have to make their money by organizing overseas trips and universities raise funds by organizing trips for groups of alumni. Some travel agents or universities (or other institutions) develop regular customers so their planning and promoting a trip is almost a guarantee of its success particularly if there is other information on their primary destination.

One brief final note on tourism — many tourist sites are over-developed. The latest fashion for ‘eco-tourism’ is to go to areas that do not have the most modern amenities. The privileged few, who have all these amenities, and many more like to get away for awhile and ‘rough it’. I noticed that some of the potential tourist sites are what would once be considered underdeveloped. With proper marketing this ‘liability’ could be turned into an asset.

[A professor of economics at the University of Houston, Texas, Dr DiGregori was an overseas delegate to the EPIGENESIS Assam 2007, organized by the Assam Institute of Management, Guwahati. Dr DeGregori spent a week visiting the interiors of Assam before the conference]

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