

Sustainable Tourism in India: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Tourism has become one of the largest and fastest growing industries since last few decades. For developing countries it is one of the biggest income generators as a service industry. It is the key driver of socio-economic progress through the creation of jobs and enterprises, infrastructure development and Foreign Exchange earnings. Tourism is one economic sector in India that has the potential to grow at a high rate and ensure consequential economic development. According to the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report India¹ has key strengths for sustainable tourism; linked mainly to cultural endowments. India ranks 12th in the Asian region and 68th globally. The country is well assessed for its natural resources (ranked 8th), and cultural resources (24th), with many World Heritage sites, both natural and cultural, rich fauna, many fairs and exhibitions. Tourism has also contributed to environmental degradation, and habitat fragmentation. Since the emergence of the World Conservation Strategy and Our Common Future, a number of arguments and debates concerning sustainable tourism development (STD) have been presented and also attempted to convert their theoretical framework of sustainable development into practice.

The paper is an overview of the present scenario of sustainable tourism, its typology; plan- programme, potentiality and threat with special reference to India.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Sustainable Tourism, WTO, GATS, Eco-Tourism

Introduction

Tourism is an intensely geographic phenomenon. It stimulates large-scale movement of people on an increasingly globalised scale and forges distinctive relationships between people as tourists and the places they visit. The presence of visitors will frequently exert a range of economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts that have important implications for local geographies.² Tourism can be considered one of the most remarkable socio-economic phenomena of the 20th century. From being an activity enjoyed by only a small group of relatively well-off people during the first half

¹ "Managing Sustainable Tourism Development" in *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report*, World Economic Forum United Nation: ESCAP tourism review, (2011), No. 22.

² Stephen Williams, *Tourism Geography-A new synthesis*, London, Routledge, 2009, p.1.

of the last century, it gradually became a mass phenomenon during the post-World War II period, notably from the 1970s onwards.³

Tourism is an export industry since foreign tourists who travel abroad purchase goods and services with money from their home countries. Tourism markets are governed by national regulations. The liberalisation of trade in tourism and travel-related services can also take place through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) of the World Trade Organization (WTO), at the multilateral level, as well as through regional trade agreements (RTAs) covering trade in services at the regional level. Regulatory commitments under such agreements can play a significant role in promoting tourism, including intra-regional tourism among developing countries. By reducing regulatory barriers through these agreements, countries can enhance the gains from tourism trade for firms, workers and consumers.⁴ According to World Tourism Organization in 2011 the industry generated an estimated 5 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP) and between 6 and 7 per cent of the overall number of jobs worldwide.

While tourism provides considerable economic benefits for many countries, regions and communities, its rapid expansion can be responsible for adverse environmental, as well as socio-cultural, impact. Natural resource depletion and environmental degradation associated with tourism activities pose severe problems to many regions favored by tourists. The fact that most tourists choose to maintain their patterns of relatively high consumption levels in places they visit can be a serious problem for developing countries and regions that lack sufficient or appropriate means for protecting their natural resources and local ecosystems from the pressures of mass tourism.⁵ As a result, sustainable tourism has emerged as an approach to tourism development.

Tourism and Sustainable Tourism

Traditional definitions of tourists and tourism commonly explain a 'tourist' as a person undertaking a tour – a circular trip that is usually made for business, pleasure or education, at the end of which one returns to the starting point, normally the home. 'Tourism' is habitually viewed as a composite concept involving not just the temporary movement of people to destinations that are removed from their normal place of residence but, in addition, the organisation and conduct of their activities and the facilities and services that are necessary for meeting their needs.⁶ McKercher⁷ explains the following fundamental truths about tourism: as an industrial activity, tourism consumes resources,

³ UN, Sustainable development of tourism, *Report of the Secretary-General (Document No. E/CN.17/2001/PC/21)*, New York, 2001.

⁴ URL: <http://t20.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/tourism-note-trade-commission-05-2010.pdf>. (accessed on 10.04.2015)

⁵ Frederico Neto, *A new approach to sustainable tourism development: Moving beyond environmental protection*, Natural Resources Forum, 2003, 27 pp. 212–222.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ B. McKercher, "Some fundamental truths about tourism: understanding tourism's social and environmental impacts" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol.1, (1993) No. 1, 6–16.

creates waste and has specific infrastructure needs; as a consumer of resources, it has the ability to over-consume resources; Tourism, as a resource-dependent industry, must compete for scarce resources to ensure survival; Tourism is a private-sector-dominated industry, with investment decisions being based predominantly on profit maximization. Unlike other industrial activities, tourism generates income by importing clients rather than exporting its products.

Sustainable tourism began life in part as a negative and reactive concept in response to the many issues that tourism had begun to create in the 1970s, issues ranging from environmental damage to serious impacts on societies and traditional cultures.⁸ To a degree, it was a concept related to fear of change. Conservation even then was a powerful force, and conservation is in some measure both haunted and powered by a fear of loss and of change.⁹ According to McMinn¹⁰ sustainable tourism suggests that proposed tourism developments should have economic advantages, create social benefits for the local community and not harm the natural environment. In addition, these goals should apply not only to the present generation, but to future generations as well. WTO has defined it as follows:

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems.¹¹

Sustainable Tourism development has three important elements: economics, environmental issues and social and cultural issues. While environmental and socio-cultural sustainability seek to ensure that non-renewable physical and cultural resources are not consumed in the process of the tourism activity, economic sustainability represents a degree of self reliance at the local level by maintaining community structures, employment and human resources.¹²

Accordingly, The World Tourism Organization (WTO) has established the following objectives for sustainable tourism: Preserve essential ecological processes, environmental resources, natural heritage and biodiversity; Respect for the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities; and Ensuring viable, long-term economic operations, and providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders.

⁸ B. Bramwell, and B. Lane, "Sustainable tourism: An evolving global approach" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 1, (1993) No. 1, 1-5.

⁹ Peckham R. Shannan (Ed.), *Rethinking heritage: Cultures and politics in Europe*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2003, p.3

¹⁰ S. McMinn, "The challenge of sustainable tourism" in *The Environmentalist*, Vol. 17, (1997), 135-141.

¹¹ World Tourism Organisation (WTO) – International Working Group on Indicators of Sustainable Tourism (IW-GIST), Indicators for the sustainable management of tourism. Winnipeg: WTO, 1993.

¹² I. Henry, and G. Jackson, "Sustainability of management processes and tourism products and contexts" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 4, (1996) No.1, 17-28.

Sustainable Tourism Types

There are many forms and types of sustainable tourism. The first one is Ecotourism which is a form of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas. It is ethically managed, non-consumptive and locally oriented tourism. The notion of ecotourism was first defined in 1983 by the Mexican, Hector C  ballos Lascurain as: *travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas.*¹³ Ecotourism pertains to a conscious and responsible effort to conserve the environment and improve the welfare of local people. Ecotourism involves respect for local sites and cultures in a view of sustainable development.

Secondly there is *Green tourism*, the environment friendly tourism that occurs in such areas where the diversity of flora, fauna and cultural heritage are primary attractions. Then we have *Cultural and Heritage tourism* 'covering all aspects of travel where visitors can learn about the area's history and way of life'.¹⁴ Thus, cultural factors in the context of tourism include entertainment, food, drink, hospitality, architecture, manufactured and hand-crafted products of a destination, and all other characteristics of a destination's way of life'. Next we have *Rural tourism* which gives travelers a flavor of physical and human environment at the countryside and also to get familiar with rural life, tradition, lifestyle, art, culture and heritage. We also have *Community tourism* which is local level community based participation in tourism sector. Community plays an integral role for sustainable tourism development and management. Then, there is *Agro-tourism* which is an enterprise which combines elements of agriculture and tourism. Example, retail markets, petting zoos, fee-fishing, festivals and fairs, tours, agriculture related museums, agriculture related festivals and fairs'.¹⁵ Lastly, we have *Equitable tourism*, based on the principle of equitable commerce which aims at the orienting tourism sector towards socio-economic development for local communities.

Sustainable Tourism in India

Sustainable Tourism is not a new concept for India. It had been continuing through its *Atithi Devo Bhava* and *Bharat Darshan* previously and now Incredible India campaign. For sustainable tourism, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India¹⁶ had, as far back as 1998, extensively deliberated with the industry and other stakeholders to formulate the wide-ranging "Ecotourism in India - Policy and Guidelines", covering ecotourism

¹³ I. Nee, and I. Beckmann, "Ecotourism The growth, its implications and trends" in A. Papathanassis (Ed.), *The Long Tail of Tourism*, Gabler Verlag ISpringer Fachmedien Wiesbaden GmbH, 2011 p.252.

¹⁴ T. Zarenthung Ezung, "Rural tourism in Nagaland, India: Exploring the potential" in *International Journal of Rural Management*, Vol.7,(2011), 133-147.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ URL: http://planningcommission.nic.in/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/wgrep_tourism.pdf, (accessed on 10.03.15)

definition, ecotourism resources of India, policy and planning, and operational guidelines for government, developers, operators and suppliers and visitors

Before finalizing a central policy on Sustainable tourism, Orissa, West Bengal and Kerala are some states who already started the sustainable tourism. The STDC (Sustainable Development Tourism Committee) of such states had four basic features.¹⁷ Firstly, promoting sustainable tourism in the environmentally fragile areas with the co-ordination of state and central government; secondly, in the planning process there is consideration of both carrying capacity and environmental degradation and also there are integrated guidelines for development policies. Third, to make local people aware about the benefits of tourism and last one is involvement of the NGO and local people.

Sustainable Tourism Resources

The geographical diversity of India makes it home to a wealth of ecosystems which are well protected and preserved.¹⁸ These ecosystems have become the major resources for sustainable tourism in our country. India has biosphere reserves, mangroves, mountains, deserts, seas, lakes, caves etc. The major resources for sustainable tourism are the areas that are environmentally and culturally vulnerable. India has seven biosphere reserves e.g. Nilgiri, Nanda Devi, Manas, Sunderban etc. In order to protect and preserve these genetic resources, India has created a number of National Parks and 421 Wildlife Sanctuaries in different parts of the country. Among the mangrove areas the major ones are Sunderban, Bhitarkanika and Mahanadi Delta, Gulf of Kutch. Coral reefs are also very vulnerable to climate change. Coral reefs are present in the areas of Andaman and Nikobar Islands, Gulf of Kutch, Lakshadweep Island and Gulf of Mannar. The great Himalayas and other mountain ranges, and also the forests and rivers have also become important attractions for tourists. Rajasthan-Gujarat area and Ladak including Lahul-Spiti and parts of Uttarakhand have a great scope for sustainable tourism. We have more than 425 scheduled tribes with distinct indigenous cultures in the remote corners of our country.¹⁹ These cultures need special care.

Sustainable Tourism: Opportunities and Challenges

Sustainable tourism is a burning issue and one of the fastest growing sectors in current world tourism industry.²⁰ Especially many developing countries like India are trying to use ecotourism, soft tourism, green tourism, agro tourism and community tourism, as an important tool to achieve sustainable development, especially by catering to the environmental impacts and challenges a few of which are discussed below.

¹⁷ S. Singh, "Tourism in India: Policy Pitfalls" in *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol.7, (2002) No.1, 45-59.

¹⁸ URL: http://www.apo-tokyo.org/gp/e_publi/gplinkeco/10 chapter8.pdf, (accessed on 10.04.15)

¹⁹ Majid Hussain, *Geography of India*, New Delhi, Tata McGraw Hill, 2011, p.13.11.

²⁰ M. Lindhard, *Tourism, Green Economy and Trade*, UNEP, 2013, pp. 259-285.

Conservation of Biodiversity

Bio-diversity is one of the principal reasons for tourism development in a particular place as it always attracts nature lovers' e.g. national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. India is a mega diversity nation due to its rich biodiversity which is a result of great climatic and altitudinal variation. "Indian landmass constitutes of only 2.4% of the world's land area, but has 11% of flora and 6.5% of fauna of the world".²¹ There are three biodiversity hotspots in our country, Western Ghats, North Eastern India and the Himalayas. The Western Ghats have more endemic species than any other place in our country. But due to commercial tourism many pristine and fragile tourist destinations are facing the problem of bio-diversity loss which is ultimately leading to instability in the ecosystem. In this situation sustainable tourism is the best option to bring both economic and ecological prosperity through the involvement of local people. In India for example Ministry of Tourism with the stakeholders, State Governments and Ministry of Environment & Forests organized a meeting under the initiative *Tigers - Our National Beauties* mainly for a solution of biodiversity loss in the national parks and wild life sanctuaries due to unplanned growth of infrastructure. As a result assessment was made in the hotels, base camps, tourist lodges in different national parks and sanctuaries e.g. Corbett National Park, Kaziranga National Park, Kanha National Park, Bandavgarh National Park, Pench Tiger Reserve and Mudumalai Wild Life Sanctuary.²² Sacred groves can be a good example of sustainable tourism where forest is protected by the local community by restricting the poaching and logging. 'Sacred groves are dedicated by local communities to their ancestral spirits or deities'. In these forests the use of forest product is on sustainable basis e.g. Gumpa Forest in Sikkim which is protected by the Lamas as it is attached to monasteries.²³

Major challenges for integrating the bio-diversity and sustainable tourism include social issues like lack of education and awareness among the people, weak and inefficient institutional structures and limited data.

Climate Change

The effect of climate change has strong and far reaching impact on sustainable tourism. Ecotourism, green tourism, mountain tourism and coastal tourism are largely affected by climate change. The research of IPCC highlights that the magnitude and frequency of extreme weather events have been increased due to climate change that exerts significant impact on terrestrial and marine biodiversity in many biodiversity hotspot regions.

The economically important Asian tourism industry is especially vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather events, in particular, because many local tourism

²¹ URL: <http://isebindia.com/09-12/10-11-3.html>, (accessed on 12.03.15)

²² URL: [http://tourism.gov.in/Tourism Division/ AboutContent.aspx](http://tourism.gov.in/Tourism%20Division/AboutContent.aspx), (accessed on 12.03.15)

²³ S. Chhatterjee, A.R.K. Sastry, B.N. Roy, and R. Lahon, "Sacred groves of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Abstract," 2000, National Workshop on Community Strategies on the Management of Natural Resources. Bhopal

businesses are directly or indirectly dependent on natural tourism resources and demonstrate a substantial lack of adaptive capacity. Extreme weather events, such as heat waves, sand storms, droughts, typhoons, and extreme rainfall, which are expected to worsen in frequency and intensity, are already reported to have impacted tourism to some degree, especially in the fields of urban tourism, heritage tourism, nature-based tourism (e.g. mountain, forest, lake and river), coastal and small islands tourism, and events that depend on climate influenced attractions (e.g. floral, water, ice and bird watching festivals).²⁴

Therefore, there are many challenging measures that are to be taken into account to curb the environmental impact. First being environmental education for all stakeholders; second encourage ethically conscious tourists who travel for preservation of planet. Effective law enforcement for conservation needs to be in place and use of tourism revenue in conservation.

Economic Significance

Out of the four pillars on which sustainable tourism rests, two are economic sustainability, an relative profitability both in the immediate and the long term; and local community sustainability.²⁵ The most significant feature of the tourism industry is its capacity to generate large-scale employment opportunities, particularly in remote and underdeveloped areas. As rural tourism is a branch of sustainable tourism so it offers enormous potential for the involvement of the local people of rural areas for the economic benefit of the population.

There are several reasons why tourism development could be a particularly effective tool of poverty reduction: Tourism offers considerable employment opportunities for unskilled labour, lower-income women; preservation of natural resources and cultural heritage; and it conserves linkages with the informal sectors; and which has the positive impact upon poorer groups. In this regard, mention can be made about the Pro-Poor Tourism Approach (PPT) existent in Uttarakhand. It is an approach to sustainable tourism in its overriding goal to deliver net benefits to the poor as well as measure the impact of tourism on environment and culture.²⁶

However it also faces some challenges like local culture may be negatively affected; people have to be properly trained as to avoid mismanagement. There should be co-ordination with private companies, public sector and local people. Involvement of local people should be there in policy making issues and to ensure private companies also give chance to the local people.

²⁴ C. Michael Hall., Daniel, Scott. And Stefan, Gossling, "The primary of climate change for sustainable tourism" in *Sustainable Tourism*, Vol. 21, (2013), No. 2, 112-121.

²⁵ N. Ahmed, "Sustainable Tourism Development in Uttarakhand Region of India" in *International Journal of Management and Social Sciences Research (IJMSSR)*, Vol. 2, (2013), No. 4, 106-111.

²⁶ Ibid.

Social and Cultural Impact

It is the era of globalization, where, in every sphere we see the assimilation and integration of each and every phenomenon. Society and culture are not exceptions. They are also getting affected by the process. Sustainable tourism can play an effective role to maintain the indigenous culture because one of the important mottos of it is Cultural sustainability. India is a mosaic of multiple cultures. In terms of language, religion, custom, belief everywhere there is versatility, because it's enriched by people coming from different places. However, tourism can sometimes lead to destruction of the social fabric of a community. The same can be countered through the cultural sustainability of the indigenous cultures of India being conserved, the tourists being educated about the desirable behavior; the traditional skills being strengthened and nurtured.

Community participation has a very important scope for promoting sustainable tourism and removing the challenges due to people being affected by the alien culture and cultural contamination.

Conclusion

Sustainability is a holistic approach to tourism development that would be ecologically responsible, socially compatible, culturally appropriate, politically equitable, technologically supportive, and finally, economically viable for the host community.²⁷ India has a unique endowment of biodiversity in flora and fauna, rivers, natural landscapes, along with rich culture and heritage that makes it all season destinations to tourists. For sustainable tourism management in India, the following plans and policies can be incorporated:

Sustainable tourism requires proper organizational structure whose primary function will be to ensure long term sustainability in natural ecosystem, local livelihood and tourism infrastructure. Strategies have to be set up to create adequate plan, programme, policies that would help for effective decision-making in tourism at all levels of Government.

Theoretically, Government policies towards tourism are not the major problem. Rather, the machinery that implements these policies must be examined for its many shortcomings. This is where the political will is needed. Infeasible economic strategies (high tariffs, excessive taxation and indebtedness, and unwanted investments), debilitating political instability (indecisiveness and developmental priorities that alter with every change in government), inclement delays between thought and action and irrational social conservatism are the real leviathans threatening the tourism industry.²⁸

²⁷ HwanSuk Chris Choi and Ercan Sirakaya, "Sustainability Indicators for Managing Community Tourism" in *Tourism Management*, Vol. 27, (2006), 1274-1289.

²⁸ Shalini Singh, "Tourism in India: Policy pitfalls" in *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 7:1, 45-59, DOI: 10.1080/10941660208722109

Sustainable tourism must also entail the entire spectrum of natural, social, cultural, technical and political environment.

India's destination planning and management leaves a lot to be desired, as the spread of tourists is currently very uneven. India is a multi-destination country of very large size. Each place is unique in itself and a tourist has to decide what he/she wants to see. The places most visited include the metropolitan cities (Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta) and traditionally known tourist destinations. These places host crowds exceeding their carrying capacity, while many places hardly get any tourism. This demands a good destination portfolio taking into account the life-cycle and carrying capacity of each and this can be achieved effectively through intelligent marketing.²⁹

Vast majority of tourists to India arrive and depart by air. Along with plans to boost tourism, the government has plans to raise the aviation sector substantially.³⁰

Sustainable tourism development is not possible without consideration of local communities. So full community participation along with effective coordination among local, regional, national tourism board and NGOs will help to enhance the scope of sustainable tourism.

There is a need to measure and monitor the indicators of sustainable tourism as to take quick and effective action for proper and scientific management with incorporating warning system.

Finally, varying educational and intellectual backgrounds have to work together in a more harmonious and effective fashion, an interdisciplinary approach should be adopted in researching sustainable tourism where synergies between different disciplines are developed to attain a more holistic synthesis.³¹

²⁹ Manjula Chaudhury, *India's tourism: a paradoxical product* Volume 17 Issue 8, December 1996, Pages 616-619

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Zhenhua Liu, "Sustainable Tourism Development: A Critique" in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, (2003), 11:6, 459-475.

