

Sustainable Tourism in West Bengal and Lower Assam: Enhancing Experiences and Inspiring Engagement Through Interpretation

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Abstract

For humans, sustainability is the potential for long-term maintenance of well-being, which has ecological, economic, political and cultural dimensions. Sustainability requires the reconciliation of environmental, equity (social) and economic demands - also referred to as the "three pillars" of sustainability (3 E's). The concept of sustainable development has a long pedigree in the field of resource management and, at last, in becoming an acceptable term in tourism. The concept of sustainability is central to the reassessment of tourism's role in society. It demands a long term view of economic activity, questions the imperative of continued economic growth, and ensures that consumption of tourism does not exceed the ability of the host destination to provide for future tourists. Public agencies are issuing guidelines for acceptable development tourism. Consumer groups are growing in number and influence and guides to responsible tourism are available. As a philosophical stance or a way of thinking, it is difficult to disagree with the concept of sustainable tourism development and responsible consumption of tourism. The question is who benefits from tourism? The simple answer is the tourism industry, that part of the economy which caters to the tourist, those firms and establishments which have a common function supplying tourist needs. In any productive process consisting of services, human resources remain the basic need. The volume of manpower engaged in activities complimentary to tourism industry in West Bengal & Lower Assam, is one of the highest in view of various sectors that are direct or indirect constituents of the industry. But the challenge remains to adequately respond to global and local challenges, to manage growth prudently, with an emphasis on ethics, poverty alleviation and sustainable environment.

Keywords: Environment, Equity, Economic demands, Resource management, Ethics, Poverty alleviation.

Indians are the fastest growing travel spenders in the world.¹ But the levels of inbound tourism have not grown to the potential, maybe due to inadequate infrastructural facilities and security measures. The vast potential and the need for rapid development was recognised only in the Seventh Plan (1985-1990), subsequent to which tourism was accorded the status of an Industry, thereby encouraging private investments in this sector. The national action plan for tourism (1992), defines the objectives of tourism development in India and the primary strategy for its development: firstly, it is a unifying and a nation-building force, through fostering greater national and international understanding, particularly amongst the youth of the country; secondly, it serves to preserve and enrich India's cultural heritage; and thirdly, it brings socio-economic benefits.

¹Report on the *National Tourism Policy*, Available in <http://www.tourism.gov.in>. Accessed on 23.10.2014

Objectives of the Study

The main focus of this study is to critically evaluate various issues and concerns of Tourism Development in India in general and West Bengal in particular. To have a proper idea about the issue the study includes the following objectives: firstly, to study the growth and performance of tourism industry in West Bengal; secondly, to analyze the different issues and concerns which are related to tourism industry in the State; thirdly, to analyze the tourism destination and products of the State and to identify the major challenges of this smokeless industry; fourthly, to study the present status and trends in the flow of tourists to West Bengal; and fifthly, to suggest ways for improvement of tourism industry as a perspective tool of economic development in West Bengal.

Materials and Methods

This study is basically descriptive in nature and based on secondary information. The present paper intends to examine the growth of tourism development and their related issues and concerns in West Bengal & lower Assam. The study analyses published books, different published research works, newspapers, magazines, reports of various government authorities, and websites. Secondary data has been collected from the website of Department of Tourism and different charts have been prepared and analysed and an inference has been drawn as per the need of the study.

Relevance of the Study

The importance of Tourism, as an instrument of economic development and employment generation, particularly in remote and backward areas, has been well-recognized the world over. Tourism generates local employment both directly in the tourism sector and in various support and resource management sectors. Tourism stimulates profitable domestic industries – hotels and other lodging facilities, restaurants and other food services, transportation systems, handicrafts and guide services. Tourism generates foreign exchange for the country and injects capital and the new money into the local economy. The business of tourism improves the general economic condition of those, who are directly involved in this sector.

Tourism diversifies the local economy particularly in rural areas where agricultural employment may be sporadic or insufficient. Tourism seeks decision making among all segments of the society, including local population so that tourism and other resources users can co-exist. It incorporates planning and zoning which ensures Tourism Development appropriate to the carrying capacity of the eco-system. Tourism stimulates improvements to local transportation, communication and other basic community infrastructures. It also leads to the infrastructural development of the underdeveloped tourist destinations.

Tourism creates recreational facilities which can be used by the local communities as well as domestic and international visitors. It also encourages and helps pay for preservation of archaeological sites and historic buildings and districts. Tourists tend to have disposable income that they spend in the country they are visiting. They also, on the whole, have more leisure time which they utilise for numerous, shorter vacations throughout the year. Most tourists are well educated with sophisticated tastes which have resulted in the demand for

better service and products. Many tourists also travel with their families, resulting in the need for more family-oriented vacation spots as well as niche destinations for other demographics, such as water sports vacations and spa resorts.

Tourism is a dynamic and pervasive industry that provides a range of benefits and value to organisations, communities and regions that participate in the industry. Tourism can provide value for a destination in a number of ways: Firstly, economical value through - increased and diversified economic activity; flow-on economic benefits through a community; stimulus for economic development and investment; Secondly, social/cultural value through - enhanced quality of life, community development, employment and income, conservation of cultural heritage, increased amenity, community pride; Thirdly, environmental value through - awareness of environmental significance, conservation of natural and built environments, and implementation of sustainable practices.

Tourism and Sustainability

The concept of sustainable development has a long pedigree in the field of resource management and, at last, in becoming an acceptable term in tourism. The concept of sustainability is central to the reassessment of tourism's role in society. It demands a long term view of economic activity, questions the imperative of continued economic growth, and ensures that consumption of tourism does not exceed the ability of the host destination to provide for future tourists. Public agencies are issuing guidelines for acceptable development tourism. Consumer groups are growing in number and influence and guides to responsible tourism are available. As a philosophical stance or a way of thinking, it is difficult to disagree with the concept of sustainable tourism development and responsible consumption of tourism.

The Concept of Carrying Capacity

Just how many visitors are too many? The answer is "It depends" and what it depends on is the carrying capacity of an area. Carrying capacity is a key concept in analysis of the potential environmental impacts of tourism.² There are three important elements to the concept:

First, the concept of physical capacity- the limit on the actual number of users that can be accommodated in a region, e.g. the number of roads, the size of the parking lots, the amount of water resources influence the physical carrying capacity.

Second, the concept of environmental capacity- the limit on the number of users that an area can accommodate before visitors perceive a decline in the desirability of the area, e.g. seasonal crowd.

Third, the concept of ecological capacity- the maximum level of users that an area can accommodate before ecological damage is incurred, e.g. beach areas are more vulnerable than mountainous areas.

² Panda T.K, Mishra S & Parida B.B, *The Socio-economic and Ecological Perspective*, (Universities Press: Hyderabad, Tourism Management 2004) 11,160-173. Accessed on 24.10.2014.

Issues and Challenges

Tourism development, its dependence on the environment and the subsequent degradation of the latter may be analysed as follows:³

First, the fragile ecosystem of the islands and beaches (Digha, Sankarpur) are affected by a host of problems- unhygienic conditions due to litter by tourists, high-rise buildings near beaches, erosion of the coast, and deforestation for the development of resorts. Second, all three forms of travel- air, water and land can contribute to unacceptable levels of noise in surroundings, apart from inherent air and water pollution. Third, tourism related activities (construction of roads, tourist accommodation, and collection of Wildlife souvenirs) have adversely affected wildlife. Fourth, mass tourism has interfered with wetlands in Rasikbil (Coochbehar) and Kulik Bird Sanctuary, Raiganj, by discouraging the arrival of migratory birds. Fifth, the beauty of the natural landscape has often been destroyed by “skyscraper hotel” syndrome. Sixth, loss of native cultural elements, especially in economically and socially backward regions of the world where there is an unbridgeable gap in the living standards and the culture of the host and the guest as seen in Dooars region.

Eco-Tourism - a Way Out

Today the forests and natural areas of India are threatened in various ways. The population is growing, people become more and more individual and India is in the middle of an industrial revolution. You know better than anyone else, how much pressure this puts on nature. Scientists are very aware of this problem and highlight the importance of local participation and even promote ownership of natural areas for the sake of conservation through the following ways:⁴

1. In and around Protected Areas and Heritage Sites we try to link people’s livelihood with conservation issues by using tourism as a tool.
2. For achieving this, we use assets, which are available locally: The cultural, historical and indigenous heritage of the local people.
3. We understand tourism as an alternative livelihood, supplementing our conservation efforts.
4. Moreover tourism, i.e. the hosting of guests, can contribute to achieving peace and pride in the home area.
5. Last, but not the least, tourists could take on the responsibility to address the problems often faced in rural India: Poverty, lack of resources and access to basic facilities.

In other words, it is suggested that there needs to be a rethinking along the following lines: Firstly, linking Protected Areas or World Natural Heritage Sites with peoples’ livelihood through tourism. Secondly, nature conservation and preservation of traditional cultures

³ IL&FS Infrastructure’s Interim Report 2012 – West Bengal on “Identification of Tourism Circuits in India.” Available in <http://www.tourism.gov.in>. Accessed on 22.10.2014.

⁴ Zulfikar Md, *Introduction to Tourism and Hotel Industry*, (NewDelhi: Vikas Publication, 2008)

(encouraging pride in indigenous and historical heritage) should be encouraged. Thirdly, the model of ALPINE (Alternative Livelihood for Protection of Important Natural areas and the Environment) can be followed to encourage sustainability. Fourthly, conversion from terrorism to tourism and peace (political stability assuring safe visits and peace). Fifthly, the model of SUPPORT - (Social Uplift, Poverty alleviation, Peoples' Ownership in Rural India through Tourism) may be followed.

Ecotourism is often synonymously called as Environment Conscious Tourism, Community Based Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Pro-Poor Tourism, Community Based Ecotourism, Nature Tourism, Wildlife Tourism, Adventure Tourism etc. So what is ecotourism?

Following the widely accepted definition of TIES, the International Ecotourism Society, Eco-tourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people."

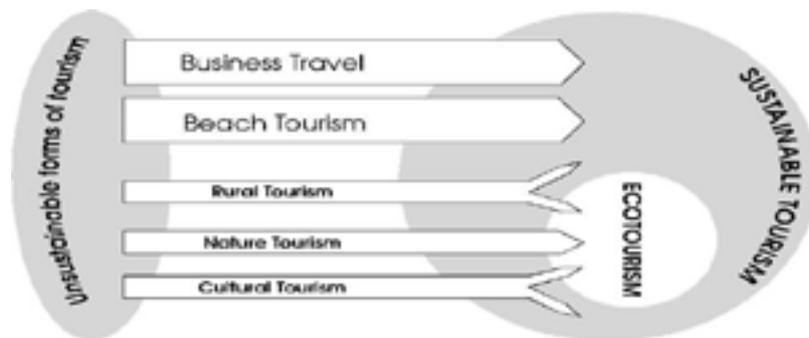


Fig 1: Ecotourism as a Sustainable Development Concept- Strasdas 2001, (drawn by M. Meier)

The basic principles for ecotourism are that it has a socio-cultural and environmental compatibility, which is beneficial to Protected Areas, any other conservation projects and for the local people; thereby creating an awareness for the importance of conservation, and, be accepted as an appropriate land use.

Consequently, the desired outcomes of Ecotourism would be: first, environmental and socio-cultural compatibility as a fundamental condition; second, creation of benefits for protected areas or conservation projects (co-financing) and for local people (participation, creation and widespread distribution of income); and third, creation of environmental awareness and more acceptance of nature conservation as a viable and appropriate land use (among tourists and other stakeholders relevant for protected areas).



Levels of participation in tourism development.

Source: STECK/STRASDAS/GUSTEDT 1999, based on GTZ-LISTRA-TÖB

Participation and Engagement of the Local Residents

Participation has been found in various Protected Areas. Local people are engaged as guides, there are community development programs financed by tourism revenues etc. But sometimes local people reported that they were not consulted regarding the implementation and the management of the protected areas that are on the other hand their livelihood. There are a few examples of how local empowerment and participation have helped ecologically vulnerable areas to transform into ecotourism hotspots:

Example 1: Garumara Jungle Camp Timber to Tourism, The Dooars, North Bengal initiation 1996 Partnership: Local people, Saw Mill Management and Travel Trade

Near Garumara National park there is a project called “From timber to tourism”. The ban on timber extraction had hit hard on the timber industry. Saw mills and factories had to close down, many people became unemployed. The management of these enterprises were mobilised to convert their infrastructure into tourism facilities. The two pictures are taken in the Garumara Jungle Camp. The left one shows the former manager bungalow, which is now used as the dining hall. On the right picture you see some former worker houses, now serving as bungalows for guests. Tourism has created a livelihood for several families around the National park and avoided some unnecessary industrial ruins.



Example 2: Sunderbans Jungle Camp, Tiger Problem to Tourism, The Sunderbans, South Bengal initiation 2003 Partnership: Local people, WWF India, WPSI, BNWCS, Forest Department.



In the Sunderbans, tiger and men were living in everything but harmony. A Tiger, whenever found in a village, often fell victim to the locals' fear and anger. In an ecotourism initiative, one N.G.O., Help Tourism, explained the importance of conserving the livelihood and trained local people to work in tourism. Today the Sunderbans Jungle Camp provides an alternative livelihood to former poachers, wood collectors and honey collectors. To have a strong backing for tourism on the island, Help Tourism tried to spread the benefits. Every fortnight a doctor holds a health camp on the island and free medication is provided to the needy. A great side effect of tourism was the revitalisation of the BonobibiYathra, which today is performed for tourists and moreover is a most welcome entertainment for the adjoining villagers.

Example 3: Manas Maozigendra Camp, Terrorism to Tourism, The Dooars, Lower Assam Initiation 2004 Partnership : Local people, Field Director's Office of Manas Tiger Reserve, the Council and Travel Trade.

Long political insurgency and terrorism in the area orphaned the Manas tiger reserve putting it in the list of "world heritage site in danger". In a small indistinct village called Kamardisa on the eastern side of the core area of Manas Tiger Reserve, a group of volunteers from the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), ChapaguriKoklabariAnchalik Committee took up the initiative of restoring their part of the forest. To support their initiative, an ecotourism wing has been established. Today these messiahs of Manas now want to free the tiger reserve from the list of "site in danger" and have started their conservation and ecotourism activities in the Eastern Himalayas. This area consists of Orissa, West-Bengal, Sikkim and the Seven



Sisters of the North-East in India and the whole of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. In other words: From Ganga to Brahmaputra river and from Mt. Kanchenjunga to the Bay of Bengal.

The several Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks in the foothills of the Himalayas historically was a continuous forest separating the hills from the plains and operating as a migration passage for wild animals. With human settlements and development now we have only small pockets of protected areas left. Migration is hardly possible anymore, inter breeding among the particular species of a handful of animals create weak gene characters. This situation and the increasing men-animal conflict are a big threat to the environment. This environment is the capital of tourism, not only today but also tomorrow. The Eastern Himalayas are considered to be the most diverse area in the world and we should give our best to keep this title. The vision is not only to conserve the existing forests and protected areas but to extend them with the support of local people. This would bring back the opportunity for animal migration and help safeguard the beauty and diversity of this area. Additionally it would allow local people a sustainable development.

The key questions to be considered, therefore, are: Firstly, how many and what type of tourists does the resident population of an area wish to attract? Secondly, what is the optimum number of tourists that the area can support in terms of its physical, environmental and social carrying capacity? Thirdly, how can these tourists contribute to the enhancement of the lifestyle of residents?

Conclusion

Developing tourism in eco-fragile areas with claims that tourism contributes to conservation and community development, are fortified without addressing the rights of communities. Tourism development has often led to displacement from ecological spaces, loss of traditional sources of livelihood, lack of accessibility to public spaces like parks, beaches, and lack of accessibility to natural resources like sea, rivers, forests, water, fodder, fuel wood. Illegal construction is another major issue wherein it is common to see hotels, huts and guest houses built in areas where construction is not permitted.

Payne and Dimanche have researched the sustainability and the social ecological responsibility of the tourism industry in general and suggest the following code of ethics:⁵ First, the tourism industry must recognise that its basis is a limited resource-the environment and that sustainable economic development requires limits to grow. Second, the tourism industry must realise that it is community based and greater consideration must be given to the socio-cultural costs of tourism development. Tourism has much to learn from others. In particular, techniques of environmental management, visitor planning and management and studies of visitors/environment relationship. It is crucial that if the adverse effects are to be prevented or remedied that politicians and planners should become less preoccupied with increasing the number of visitors (and indeed with volume as a yardstick of success) and devote more consideration to the long term welfare of the resident population.

⁵ Payne D & Dimanche F, "Towards a Code of Conduct for the Tourism Industry: An Ethics Model", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 15, No. 9 (1996), 997-1007. Available in <http://www.jstor.org>. Accessed on 23.10.2014.