

Village Tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya: Ensuring Sustainable Development and Rural Livelihood

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Abstract

Darjeeling Himalaya is one of the major attractions of tourists throughout the globe. The lofty Mountain range with snow clad peaks, green carpet of forest crossed by mighty river Teesta and Rangit gives this place a cinematic charm and is a heavenly paradise for tourists to spend a quality time with their families. Therefore, many aspire to make a visit to this Himalayan region. The main revenue of this place comes from the Tourism Industry, Plantation areas and Hydel power stations. Every year, the month of September-November is the peak tourist season in Darjeeling Hills. All hotels and lodges are packed with tourists. This provides a good prospect for the urban dwellers to earn handsome money by offering a number of services in and around bazaar and major tourist areas. In recent years it is observed that the taste of attraction among tourists have shifted to village areas. This is because from the hustle and bustle of crowded cities and towns they rather prefer to search for a virgin spot where they can calm their mental stress and rejuvenate themselves freely in the pure environment. The rural areas of Darjeeling Himalaya open an avenue for the tourists and at the same time provide prospect of employment to the valley youths and people of the study area. The present study covers the Takdah-Teesta valley and its adjoining areas. Based on empirical research. Thus a modest attempt of the authors to link ecology with proper human management keeping in view sustainable tourism development and environmental balance in the rural areas of the Darjeeling Himalaya.

Keywords: Sacred Groves, Himalayas, Village Tourism, Sustainable development, Livelihood

Introduction

Tourism has been considered as the world's leading and fastest growing industry. Globally and domestically, the tourism industry is an important source of revenue and livelihood. In the past 50 years, tourism has been marked by extraordinary expansion. In 1950 there were 25 million international tourist arrivals recorded. By 1999, the World Tourism Organization estimated that there were in excess of 664 million international tourist arrivals and that international tourism receipts for that year (excluding

international fare receipts) reached US\$ 455 billion.¹ Tourism is continuing to grow and it is predicted that by 2010, there will be one billion international tourist arrivals annually. As a sector of the economy, tourism is used by many countries to advocate economic development. It is used as a development strategy due to its economic effects such as generating foreign exchange, creating employment and stimulating local economies.²

The global tourism sector is currently dominated by industrialized economies from which most of the world's tourism flow originates. The tourism demands from people in more developed countries however, are leveling off. Developing economies, particularly the more dynamic emerging economies such as India, have been experiencing an increased demand for travel. This has led to a rapid growth in domestic and interregional travel.³ Mountain tourism is one of the important constituents of global tourism since it also has become an important contributor of revenue to global economy by sharing a good portion of the total revenue collected by the global tourism industry.⁴ Darjeeling, located on the Eastern Himalayan range, offers an excellent venture for tourism for its beautiful landscapes and recent phenomenon of 'Village tourism' in remote areas of the country side. Village tourism or tourism in rural areas is a new form of activity that can bring economic and social benefits to the society. In Asia, especially in India, village tourism in its true form is relatively new.

Definition of Tourism

Tourism refers to movement of people from one place to another. This movement is temporary in nature which is done generally in leisure time for recreation, pleasure, adventure and also for knowledge.⁵ It also implies people's going out for those places which have religious significance. Tourism involves multi-faceted activities which collectively fulfill various needs of the travellers.⁶ In sociological terms, 'tourism' can be defined as the management of social relationships coming out due to interaction among the travelers and the local people of a place, where the travelers come and stay temporarily mainly for relaxation or entertainment. Tourism plays a very important role for the tourists and the local people to understand each other's culture. The social and economic behavior of the tourists has a reflective effect upon the life style, attitude

1 Milne S and Ateljevic, I, *Tourism, Economic Development and the Global - local nexus: theory embracing complexity*, (Published online 2001), Vol. 3

2 K.W. Awang, W.M. Hassan, et.al., *Tourism Development: A Geographical Perspective*, *Asian Social science*, 2009, Vol. 5.

3 T. Berno and K. Bricker, 'Sustainable Tourism Development: the long road from theory to practice' in *International Journal of Economic Development*, 2001, Vol. 3.

4 Bhui, "Livelihood in the Era of Global Tourism: A Sociological Study of Some Tourist Service Providing Occupational Groups in Darjeeling Himalaya", occasional paper, NBU, 2013.

5 Gulam, *Socio-Economic Impact of Tourism*, Jaipur, Pointer Publishers, 2000.

6 Sinha, *Tourism Strategies, Planning and Development*, New Delhi, Commonwealth Publishers, 2005.

and economic well-being of the local people. Similarly, tourists also are influenced by local people and their culture. In this way, tourism not only has an economic aspect but also has a socio-cultural meaning.⁷

Study Area

The present study area covers the Takdah and its adjoining areas of Rangli Rangliot block which is one of the administrative divisions of Darjeeling district located at 27° 01'46"N to 88° 21'25"E with the total area of 305.83sq/km. The area falls under the Agro climatic region of Eastern Himalayan zone II of the sub region of Northern Himalaya.

Objective, Data base and Methodology

The present study aims to give an account of the development of tourism in Darjeeling in general and Takdah in particular. But the main objective is to discuss the prospects of village tourism on the socio-economic condition of the study area. The study identifies to explore the possibilities of the growth of rural tourism that could play an important role in sustainable development and better livelihood of rural societies. The paper also tries to throw a light on a few potential rural tourism places of the study area. The approaches and methods followed in the research paper on village tourism is empirical one and comprehensive reports available from secondary sources are also taken into consideration. A case study method was implied in order to show impacts of village tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya.

Tourism in Darjeeling Himalaya

The Himalaya has for centuries caught the imagination of travellers. The mountain range is known for its breathtaking natural beauty and is inhabited by people with a uniquely rich cultural diversity. Tourism in a broader sense has existed for a long time in the Himalayas in the form of pilgrimage to Hindu sanctuaries that are located high up in the mountains. With the arrival of the British in the 19th century, summer resorts, the so-called Hill Stations, were established. Examples for these foundations are Darjeeling, Nainital, Mussoorie and Shimla.⁸ Darjeeling is one of the world famous hill stations. It is known as the 'Queen of Hills' for its beautiful landscapes. It was established in 1835 by the colonial British. They established Darjeeling mainly for their habitation during the summer as the cold climate of Darjeeling suited health. Darjeeling became a global tourist destination since its establishment.

Takdah is one of the major tourist destinations in Darjeeling Himalaya. It is located 30 kms away from the main town. It is well connected with roads except few remote villages. During colonial period it was a cantonment area, therefore, it is also known

⁷ Bhui, 2013. *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

⁸ <http://www.spaltenberger.de/usa/himalayantourism.pdf> (accessed on 5.10.13)

as Takdah Cantonment. The place offers cool and calm charm of natural beauty, forest villages and a wide variety of flora and fauna. The establishment of tourism in recent years has gained some momentum due to the flow of both foreign and domestic tourists. The majority of people in Takdah are tea garden employees and army personnel.

Village Tourism as Livelihood Option

According to recent World Bank development indicators, the majority of the population in the Himalaya lives in poverty (47% - 83%) with 17%-30% living in absolute poverty.⁹ People in the mountainous region are facing frequent natural hazards, degradation of resources because economically utilizable resources and livelihood options for additional income generation at local level are limited, out migration has become a major livelihood strategy for rural hill people. It is believed that village tourism is one of the most promising adaptation strategies to these changing conditions, generating much needed resources for the adaptation process, building upon the strength of the region.

Village tourism can yield high levels of employment and income for poor, especially in the study areas where biodiversity and indigenous cultures have not yet been significantly eroded. Hilly villages are important assets for the tourism industry. With their scenic, splendor, colourful cultures and romantic, spiritual or adventurous connotations these villages have an undeniable tourism potential. Furthermore in agriculture or other traditional industrial activities rural people often struggle to get their products to the market. Village tourism delivers the market to this product.

Village Tourism in Study Area

Darjeeling Himalaya nestled in the laps of mountains has a number of rural villages having dynamic recreational facilities ensuring fullest tourist satisfaction. Village environment is very clean and therefore can be present in different manner by creating new avenues for tourism and sustainable development of rural livelihood. The villages of Takdah have various aspects to promote itself into potential tourist destination. The author tries to highlight some of the important avenues to promote tourism development in the study area:

Agro Tourism: Darjeeling apart from being a sensational tourist destination is also an agricultural district of North Bengal. The majority of the rural populations of Darjeeling are engaged in agricultural activities. The terraced green paddy fields, orange orchards, beautiful tea gardens are enough to attract the city dweller to enrich themselves with the authentic lifestyle of village. This not only provides beautiful scenery but also paves for wellness tourism where tourists really attain

9 World Bank Report, 2006.

a peaceful state of mind, body and soul. It not only benefits the tourist but also enhances the local economy and paves way for sustainable rural development. The agricultural village of Rampuria busty, Poomong busty and Hom busty are ideal locations in Takdah block for the development of Agro Tourism.

Colonial Tourism: Darjeeling is a colonial hill station since its establishment. Darjeeling has retained its colonial structure in some places which is of great historical importance. Takdah cantonment is also one of the outcomes of colonial investment as it was a cantonment for their regiments. The forests and calm environment of Takdah attracts them and the remnants of colonial structure are still present in Takdah in disastrous condition. With the proper government initiatives and local support these structures can be maintained functioning for upcoming colonial tourism.

Creation of Gardens and Parks: Takdah is very famous for its floral variety in Darjeeling with wide range of orchids' being found. One can notice small flower nurseries owned privately by local residents. The establishment of gardens and parks in the study area has wide possibilities of tourism and small scale floriculture development prospects.

Wellness Tourism: Wellness tourism is also one of the attracting packages like religious pilgrimage tourism. The clean and peaceful surrounding of forests can really rejuvenate people from their mental stress. Moreover the Tibetan medical institution Chagpore in Takdah can play the pivotal role in the development of village and wellness tourism in the study area.

Home stay tourism: Recent years have witnessed a steady increase in village home stay tourism in the adjoining areas of Takdah. The residents of Rampuria Forest village in Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary under the same administrative block are keen to build on this opportunity to start a sustainable tourism enterprise that is community based and conservation oriented. The Rampuria Village Home Stay Tourism Committee together with ATREE, after several consultative meetings with the community, has developed a Village Home Stay Tourism Management Plan that includes guidelines for institutional and environmental management and marketing along with periodic monitoring and evaluation based on widely accepted principles of low impact, sustainable, equitable and community managed tourism. Residents of the village have been hosting guests in their homes since a few years. However, this has largely been unregulated and has not contributed significantly to the community as a whole. While the community is aware of the income and employment generating potential of such an enterprise, they are also aware of the negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts of unregulated

and uncontrolled tourism. The Plan seeks to identify and develop strategies for mitigating such undesired outcomes. The Plan was shared with representatives of the Forest Department, Tour and Travel Operators, Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA), Eco-Development Committees from other Forest Villages and residents of Rampuria at an all- stakeholders meeting on 16 June 2013.¹⁰

Impact of Village Tourism

The impact of Village Tourism can be measured with the following criteria:

Economic and Social Sustainability: Whenever the tourists visit the village, the local revenue of the place is increased enhancing the economic stability and social upliftment. The avenues for new jobs will be increased and to a certain extent glaring rural unemployment can be checked. Moreover it offers a good prospect for side income earning beside the agricultural activities.

Opening of new market: Tourism promotes to establish a new market for the local entrepreneurs to sell their products which are indigenous and rarely found outside. It also gives an empowerment to the rural women folk to sell their agricultural products, handicrafts and food items to tourists.

Cultural integration: The most important impact of tourism is sharing of different cultural ideologies and implementation of new thinking in the very social life.

Better infrastructure: The local residents decorate the village to make it more attractive for tourists. Repairing of old building and construction of basic amenities like housing, sanitation and water lead to better infrastructure. These infrastructures are not only for tourists but eventually replicated for everyone in the village.

Fifthly, revival of cultural heritage: Now-a-days village tourism is promoting local culture, food and customs which attract the tourists. Indeed it revived the cultural heritage of the local ethnic communities which was almost forgotten in the mode of modernization.

Sixthly, community development: Tourism industry leads to community development of a particular place by providing better opportunities for awareness towards community with the wider used.

10 Gurung Home Stay Tourism in Rampuria, Eastern Himalayas, ATREE, 2013.

Conclusion

Village tourism could be one of the more promising strategies to address the unemployment situation in the rural areas of Darjeeling Himalaya. Village tourism would create immediate profitable local livelihood opportunities in the study area and would reduce the pressure for rural people to migrate, or resort to unsustainable development options, and will provide the local population with necessary resources to reduce their vulnerability to challenges.