
Community Based Tourism and local Culture in India

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Many of the world's most beautiful resources exist in endangered habitats and vulnerable communities. Community-based ecotourism is a form of ecotourism that emphasizes the development of local communities and allows for local residents to have substantial control over, and involvement in, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community. Community-based ecotourism should foster sustainable use and collective responsibility, but it also embraces individual initiatives within the community.

With this form of ecotourism, local residents share the environment and their way of life with visitors, while increasing local income and building local economies. By sharing activities such as festivals, homestays, and the production of artisan goods, community-based tourism allows communities to participate in the modern global economy while cultivating a sustainable source of income and maintaining their way of life. A successful model of community-based tourism works with existing community initiatives, utilizes community leaders, and seeks to employ local residents so that income generated from tourism stays in the community and maximizes local economic benefits.

Although ecotourism often promises community members improved livelihoods and a source of employment, irresponsible tourism practices can exhaust natural resources and exploit local communities. It is essential that approaches to community-based ecotourism projects be a part of a larger community development strategy and carefully planned with community members to ensure that desired outcomes are consistent with the community's culture and heritage. In many ways, participants are not employees, but managers. Community-based tourism initiatives decrease poverty not only by increasing income but also by providing residents of rural communities with the tools and knowledge necessary for long-term critical thinking and decision-making. Tourism is no panacea; community-based ecotourism and responsible tourism should be part of wider sustainable development strategies.

Identity: Respect and preserve all the characteristics of the environment, help residents reclaim historical practices, revitalize productive activities, highlight the ethnic background of the population, and highlight the unique aspects of the locality, such as topography, climate, architecture, cuisine and handicrafts.

Roots and Customs: Highlight local cultural practices so that communities share their cultures and traditions with tourists with authenticity. Invaluable educational opportunities such as homestays and town-hall-style round of talks are encouraged so that tourists and local community members can mutually share cultural aspects such as food, music, folklore, and goods. Both visitor and community cultures will always be treated with appreciation and respect.

Ecological Consciousness and Harmony: Seek to conserve natural ecosystems and cultures by being a part of a larger development plan. All plans have a low impact on the local environment while highlighting the unique aspects of the locality, such as topography, climate, and architecture. The conservation of nature and rigorous concern with the environment influence the development of infrastructure for community-based ecotourism activities (i.e. building houses, roads, showers, etc.).

Local Control: Local control of the community-based ecotourism industry. Local leadership leads plans and encourages clear and transparent decision-making. Community members actively make decisions on strategies and acceptable levels of tourism based upon the community's culture, heritage and vision. Strategies also equip local communities with the tools and knowledge necessary for decision-making, and to build effective structures to enable the community to influence, manage and benefit from ecotourism development and practice.

Sustainable Economic Development: Stimulate the local economy by generating income through the sustainable use of natural resources. All plans seek to ensure that the local population has an equitable share in benefits.

Community-based tourism development

The eastern Himalayan state Sikkim provides suitable backdrop for the promotion of rural and community based tourism with its predominantly rural setting (75.3% rural population, Census of India 2011) and beautiful natural scapes. The physical features of the state include rugged mountains, deep valleys and dense forests consort with raging rivers, lake and waterfalls. The state has the steepest rise in altitude over the shortest distance and has within its 7,096 sq. kms the entire climatic range, from tropical to temperate to alpine. Sikkim covers 0.2% of the geographical area of the country.

The cultural diversity of the state comes from its three major tribes of Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepalese. The Lepchas were the original inhabitants of Sikkim. The Lepchas are predominantly the Buddhists but many of them are also Christians. The earliest Lepcha settlers, however, believed in the bone faith. The Bhutias originally belong to the Tibet. These people migrated to Sikkim after the 15th century and settled in North Sikkim. The Nepalese migrated in large numbers in Sikkim from Nepal. They introduced the terraced system of cultivation. Today, the Nepalese constitute more than 80% of the total population of Sikkim. Nepalese are sub divided into Limboo, Tamang, Chettri, Rai, Gurung, Newars, Sherpa and Bhawan. They are Hindus except the Tamangs, Gurungs and Sherpas, who are Buddhists.

Tourism plays a significant role in the economy of Sikkim and it is Sikkim's one of the largest revenue generating sector after agriculture, mining and forest (Information and Public Relations Department, Govt. of Sikkim).

The natural strength of Sikkim has been aptly supported by the government policies and Sikkim is the first state to have a policy on ecotourism and it's strictly enforced. The concepts of rural tourism, ecotourism, adventure tourism and homestays have become popular here. There are a number of villages in Sikkim where community based tourism and rural tourism is being promoted. Ministry of Tourism, Government of India is promoting 11 villages under Rural Tourism project in Lachen in north; Chumbung, Tingchim, Maniram Bhanjyang, Rong, Srijunga Martam and Darap in west; Pastenga, Pendam Gadi Budang and Tumin in East and Jaubari in South Sikkim. The UNESCO project for the development of Cultural Tourism and Ecotourism in the Mountainous Regions of Central and South Asia is sponsored by the Norwegian Government which aims to promote cooperation between local communities, national and international NGOs, tour agencies in order to involve local populations fully in the employment opportunities and income generating activities that tourism can bring in form of rural tourism and village tourism. The following are the villages supported under UNESCO project Dzongu, Kewzing, Yuksom, Uttarey, Darap, Hee-Bormiok, Lachen, Assangthang, Kabi, Chumbong and Rey Mindu. Two villages, Darap in west and Pastanga in east have been chosen for the study to find out the local community perceptive on Community Based Tourism Development. These villages were identified as successful case studies of rural tourism in the evaluation studies of Government of India (Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013). The rural tourism projects of Government of India are based on community participation.

Darap is a small village in west Sikkim at an altitude of 5,100 feet or 1554.48 meters above sea level. The word Darap has its origin from the Limboo (Tribal) word “Tanlop/Therap” which literally means a flat land. This valley is exposed to temperature variations of 05 degree centigrade to 28 degree centigrade. This makes Darap storehouse of various rare and endangered species of flora and fauna and various unique and rare aspects of the Limboo culture are preserved in this valley. The village is inhabited by 95% Limboo population occupies a place of pride in one of the richest limboo culture heritage of Sikkim. Darap has towering Khanchendzonga – 3rd highest peak (also the guardian deity) and is just 7 kilometers from the tourist hub of Pelling offering peaceful environment similar to Pelling. The village has come up in recent years as one of the major village tourism and offbeat travel destination of Sikkim for its sustainable tourism practices through Community Based Tourism Development.

The initiative to develop the village as a tourist destination by using local resources was taken up by local NGO named Darap Eco Development Committee which was formed in the year 2005. They organized the families and helped develop homestays in the village houses. They also identified potential destinations for visitors and created an infrastructure to develop the tourist

spots. Currently 20 homestays and house owners are registered with the NGO but each family in the village is reaping the benefits of the tourism initiative. Each family has two-three single or double bed rooms to accommodate the tourists. For homestay facilities the visitors have to pay USD 30 – 35 per person, per night including breakfast, lunch and dinner. The guides are paid USD 5 per day per group. They have different rates for trekking, excursion and other adventure activities.

Tourists in Darap can pick and choose from an array of products ranging from trekking to picnic to meditation and farming. They can also arrange mountain biking and learning the local language and cooking. The local resident of Darap and President of Darap Eco-tourism Committee received award for State best tourism development committee in 2010 by department of tourism, Government of Sikkim and he is also recognized as “Top 10 locals in tourism in the world” by leap local published in guardian U.K on 19th June 2012.

Pastanga in Lingzey is a small village in the East Sikkim at an altitude of 4676 feet or 1425 meters. It is just a two hour drive and 28 kms from Gangtok. The village name is derived from its older names “Pa-Sing-Tel” in Kulung Language meaning “forefather's wood collecting place” and “Pasing Tengkha” in Bhutia language meaning “below bamboo forest” that gradually changed to Pastanga. More than twelve varieties of bamboo thrive in the area and the nearby hills.

Attractions include orchids and rhododendrons and various species of birds. The village is inhabited by three ethnic communities namely Rai, Bhutia and Lepcha. The majority population is of farmers and earn the livelihood through traditional organic agriculture, horticulture practice and dairy farming. The village is one of the main producers of large cardamom and ginger. The village has total of 95 households constituting the population around 500 people.

The majorities among the population are Rai followed by Bhutias and Lepchas. Tourists are rotated among the ten members of KEEP (Khedhi Eco-Tourism and EcoDevelopment Promotion) local NGO, who have homestay facilities, and pay between USD 24 to 26 (depending on the size of the group and type of visitors) per night, of which from 2% to 10% is deposited with the organization for village development, tourist amenities development, conservation activities, operation and maintenance of office and maintenance of office and programs and the rest is paid to the homestay operators, guides, porters and cultural dancers. The guides are paid USD 2/day per group.

Tourists can also trek to Khedi on the Malinggo trail, a three to five night adventure for which they pay USD 42/night, and there are plans to offer mountain biking.

Role of the local community:

The local communities play pivotal role in Community Based Tourism Development with the support of local NGO' s. Villagers participate in tourism by playing host; offering home stays

and arranging participation of tourists in village and tourism activities such as basket weaving, planting rice, milking cows, preparing local food, day hikes to pilgrimage sites, mountain biking and cultural shows etc. Their friendly demeanours and traditional ways add value to the experiences of tourists.

Community members work as a team to manage tourism facilities and tourist resources in a proper manner. The different works of facilitation of tourists are divided among community members that work cohesively for a fine tour experience. 80% in Darap and 75% in Pastanga villagers believes that Community Based Tourism has created jobs in the village and jobs are good. They believe that the incomes of the villagers have increased with the growth of tourism but general prices have increased too. Villagers derive their incomes from accommodation, providing guides, porters, selling handicrafts, hot stone baths, etc.

70% villagers in Darap are unhappy with the transport facilities and poor road condition from Siliguri to Darap. The villagers in Pastanga are happy with the transport facilities and the road condition (85%). 90% people from Darap and Pastanga says the toilets facilities are not developed for tourists. Both the villages have good recreational facilities in their villages. Both the villagers of Darap and Pastanga strongly believe that tourism has helped them to preserve and promote their uniqueness and they take pride for developing their villages for Community Based tourism. 90% villagers from Darap and Pastanga say that tourism is not disturbing our age old traditions is helping in the promotion of their traditions and culture to the world.

Both the villagers believe that their village has good potential to attract tourists, as their tradition, culture and location are different from other villages offering CBT. In Darap, most of the local community members have built the separate home for tourists with good wash room facility. Good hygiene and cleanliness are well taken care of and in Darap and 70% residents participate in the twice-monthly garbage clean-up initiated by Darap Ecotourism Committee. Garbage management facilities are clearly visible in and around the village. In Pastanga, most of the local communities shared their rooms with the tourists with separate washroom facilities. In Pastanga, the local community now participates in the garbage cleanup initiated by Khedi Eco-Tourism and Eco-Development Promotion. However, the 80% people think the level of awareness is still low among local community. Members of Khedi Eco-Tourism and Eco-Development Promotion, KEEP also conducts a 3 days cleaning campaign in Khedi, during which they urge independent tourists to dispose of their garbage in a responsible manner.

Conclusions:

This paper looks at two cases of Community Based Tourism Development with similar goal. Both the villages in Darap and Pastanga have the major problem training of villagers in a proper manner. Villagers have received training from local NGO's and government but the primary survey of the villages revealed many gaps in the training. The participation of youth (20-25

years) of the villages in community based tourism is low and 60% of the youths are not involved in Community Based Tourism. They must be encouraged for sustainability of CBTD in future.

There are still areas where these NGO's can venture to bring more professionalism in their activities such as joining hands for marketing and using travel agents to build a distinct visible image of these villages. A uniform pricing system and system of payment to service providers could be great help. Language is still a major obstacle for tourists coming to these villages and tourists are often dependent on the guide for interpretation, but the guide is not always readily available.

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