

Exploring the Socio-economic Dimensions of Rural Tourism and Community-based Conservation: A Case Study of Manas National Park, Assam, India

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(Received 8 April, 2024; Accepted 24 May, 2024)

ABSTRACT

This study explores into the intricate relationship between rural tourism, community-based conservation, and socio-economic dynamics, using the renowned Manas National Park in Assam, India, as a case study. Manas National Park stands as a testament to the potential synergy between conservation efforts and rural development through tourism. This paper explores how community involvement in conservation initiatives has not only preserved the natural biodiversity of the park but also fostered socio-economic upliftment in the surrounding rural areas. Through qualitative analysis, this research investigates the impact of tourism on local communities, examining aspects such as income generation, employment opportunities, cultural preservation, and infrastructure development. It explores the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable tourism practices, emphasizing the need for balanced development that prioritizes both environmental conservation and community welfare. Insights gleaned from this case study can inform policymakers, conservationists, and local stakeholders on effective strategies for leveraging rural tourism as a catalyst for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation in similar contexts worldwide.

Key words: *Rural tourism, Community-based conservation, Socio-economic dynamics, Manas National Park, Conservation efforts, Rural development*

Introduction

With its extensive natural resources, historical sites and rich cultural legacy, India is well known throughout the world as a top tourist destination. One of the key economic growth drivers in India today is the tourism sector which significantly boosts foreign exchange revenues. Tourism in rural area has a great deal of promise. According to the Tourism Ministry of India, “any form of tourism that show cases rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting ¹the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a

more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism”. It includes non-urban activities that span a wide variety of temptations and impart a sense of location (Mili, 2012). It is closely related to the tenets of sustainable tourism which are understood to be inextricably linked to developing travel destinations and generally eco-friendly travel. The goal of rural tourism in India is to create employment opportunities, a sustainable means of subsistence for the local population and to combat poverty by reviving and regenerating traditional arts and crafts and preserving rural Indian cultural heritage. Out of the Indian states, Assam has the fastest growth in tourism. The state has a large number of

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tourism attractions that might draw visitors from around the nation and overseas. The growth of tourism in Assam absolutely requires the involvement of local populations. The most critical element for the success of the tourism industry, aside from all the positive and negative impacts, is to involve the indigenous people by imparting to them all the fundamentals of the socio-economic aspects of tourism, so that the tourism areas' excellence and the locality's friendly atmosphere endure.

Dynamics of Community Participation

Today, tourism is the major source of income and economic activity for developing countries like India. Local community participation in tourism activities has also become one of the major principles of sustainable rural tourism (Nagarjuna, 2015). Rural tourism is characterized by local community participation as they present much of the rural tourism experiences. Local communities play a vital role in tourism development as they provide essential services to the visitors (Abas and Hanafiah, 2014). Tourism is a major source of employment and it has all the capabilities in contributing towards the livelihood of the local community. Local community participation in tourism can be viewed in two ways: from the decision-making perspective and from benefits gained from tourism (Timothy, 1999). Community participation increases people's sense of control over resources that affect their lives and also promotes self-confidence and self-awareness (Nampila, 2005). However, there are several constraints to community participation in tourism activities. These factors include lack of trust between members, lack of information and resources, segmented and complex institutional arrangements, dependence on other stakeholders make them vulnerable (Paimin *et al.*, 2014). Community participation is highly essential in order to increase the benefits of tourism and it can be enhanced by addressing these barriers while at the same time taking the necessary steps to promote the principles of sustainable participation (Medlik, 2004).

Communities in Manas National Park

The state of Assam lying in the North-eastern corner of the country is a haven for all nature and wildlife enthusiasts. Declared as a National Park in 1990, Manas National Park in the Baksa district of Assam has started to make its mark in the tourist track map of the World with thousands of visitors coming ev-

ery year. Manas National Park in Assam is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a Project Tiger Reserve, an Elephant Reserve as well as a Biosphere Reserve. It is located at Himalayan foothills where it's having a unique biodiversity and scenic landscapes. It is also the habitation space for several indigenous communities, each with its own distinct culture and traditions. Among those communities, Bodo is the predominant tribe residing in the premises of Manas National Park. Apart from Ahrang, the only forest village in the core of the national park, there are more than 50 villages on the fringes of the park. These villages are distributed among the three ranges within the park: Panbari, Bansbari and Bhuiyapara. They have a conventional lifestyle and the primary source of their income is agriculture and forest-based activities and women are skilled weavers. These tribal communities often live in close proximity to the national park and have a deep connection with the natural environment. Their traditional knowledge and practices play a crucial role in conserving the biodiversity of the region. With the increasing tourism potentiality of the region, these people are now engaging in different tourism related activities including dining, lodging, shop keeping, tourist guides etc.

Growing Tourism and Changing Economic Structure

One of the industries with the quickest growth rates is tourism, which has also shown to be the most successful economic sectors across a number of nations. The modernization of infrastructural facilities benefits the communities with economic strength. In the study area the local people's ability to live better lifestyle, access to goods and services, educational attainment and other factors can all be attributed to increased money and employment generated by tourism. The sharing, comprehension and resolution of contemporary social concerns leads to a rise in social consciousness. The interchange of ideas and issues across communities can be facilitated by tourism in a beneficial and productive way. The creation of new jobs is one of the tourism's most significant economic benefits including occupations in retail, hospitality and transportation. The growth rate of domestic and international visitors to the local tourist site is directly correlated with the sales of local goods and handicrafts. The local community's craftsmen and craftsmanship have been significantly impacted by the growing trend of cultural tourism

in the study area. Local businesses and communities can work together with the public sector to create, package and promote a whole range of tourism experiences that are already for export to both local and foreign tourists. These can include gastronomic, athletic, musical, cultural, artistic and recreational pursuits. By creating fresh, cutting-edge tourism products and enlisting the support to those behind them, Barbados may benefit from its significant achievements in the fields of music, heritage and food etc. The assertions of tourism's economic importance give the sector a greater air of responsibility. The travel and tourism industry has consistently made a significant contribution to various forms of government revenue. The advantages of tourism that are directly tied to tourism-related activities include foreign exchange profits, tax revenues, the growth of hotels and transportation industries and an increase in employment.

However, the local community could suffer from great harm of tourism in some cases. The destination economy may be destroyed or become unbalanced in a number of ways, including inflation, an excess reliance on tourists, and rapid consumerism. Workers may move from other business sectors to the tourism industry as a result of a rapid rise in tourism related activities near a well-known tourist destination. This is the unfavorable economic impact of tourism known as labour exodus from the tourism industry. All the other industries within the destination economy can be severely harmed by a sizeable workforce that speaks with a drawl. It can be extremely risky for the local economy and population if tourism plays a significant role in the creation and expansion of the economy. When the majority of the destination economy's income comes from the tourism industry, this is referred to as overdependence on tourism. The total economy of the location may collapse if the tourism industry suffers from some reason. The issue of seasonal employment effects on the local people can be brought on by tourism. Jobs in the tourism sector are seasonal and poorly paid. Along with that the issue of inflation on the local market might be brought on by increased tourism activity surrounding a local destination. Normal costs of products and services can spike considerably during the busy season, which may cause issues for the local people. Every time the destination economy declines for any reason – natural or manmade- because of terrorism, natural catastrophes etc., the entire region loses its economic stability.

Socio-cultural Impacts

Tourism is undoubtedly a social behavior. Since individuals or group travelers frequently have to travel great distances, they usually spend a short amount of time at each destination. This facilitates productive interaction between visitors and the community. As the number of domestic and international visitors increase, tourism begins to have an impact on the target society. Individuals and tourist groups engage in direct interactions with the host community. The local population gains a lot from this engagement and communication as they learn about and comprehend numerous innovative and outstanding ways of life. The target community is frequently inspired to improve its behaviour and living standards by groups of tourists who frequently come from better social and economic backgrounds. The locals attempt to imitate tourist groups' lifestyle standards as long as they are continuously observing them including their food, thoughts, conduct, knowledge and education in an effort to satisfy them to spend more time in their community. Even though the effort is primarily focused on economic benefits, social and ethical issues are also indirectly altered. The regular interactions with international visitors advance all facets of life including education, communication and revenue. Their enhanced social status encourages them to adopt higher standards of living and follow them. Since travelling is a social activity, it can be used in a good way to raise social awareness and building lasting relationships. In addition to educating the local population about important global and national issues, tourism can also boost emotions of pride and prestige in one's country. Tourism's contribution to social fulfillment indirectly promotes social and national integration.

The tourism sector is one that trades in intangible experiences. In order to build successful communication with the outside world, several cultural and social activities related to tourism are crucial. It is feasible for locals and tourists to exchange ideas and artistic creations at various cultural festivals and gatherings that take place close to the tourist site. Tourists frequently become quite close to the local population during these cultural and social activities by witnessing and comprehending their native arts and traditions.

Civil Unrest

The forest-dwellers are deprived of basic life-sus-

taining infrastructure, especially schools, electricity, health centers, water, roads and sanitation. Owing to these constraints, the movement of the villagers is restricted to the national park for collecting non-timber forest products. Health issues are rampant in these areas which is a sensitive indicator of human development. Villagers have been subjected to systematic exclusion from the mainstream and hence, most of them are woefully unaware of the new legislations related to the Forest Department. They find themselves at the wrong side of the law and are being tagged as encroachers. The locals, who look at the forest as an 'open-to-all' property, have to restrict their movement because of various prohibitions. This has created a precarious situation for the villagers since they depend on the national park to meet their basic needs. The forest-dwellers suffer from an identity crisis as the legality of their status as villagers of this region has been questioned time and again. The conflict over who has the right to resources has been perennial. For instance, villages like Dihira, which have migrant Bodo communities, were severely affected by the conflict for BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area Districts). Similarly, villages like Narayanguri continue to face ethnic conflicts rendering them helpless and increasingly dependent on the forest.

While the villages languish in economic backwardness, what has made life even more difficult for the residents is persecution at the hands of Bodo militants. Many people were displaced causing great harm to the social fabric. The process of social dislocation is also characterized by the separation of kinship groups, the inability of families to work together, the breakdown of informal social and safety networks, the dissolution of long-standing living groups, the formation of social divisions, and the hindrance to economic growth and modernization. The social tensions tend to rise, leading to the disintegration of social support networks. This can be exacerbated by a wide range of factors, such as low self-confidence, identity crisis, cultural perversion, changing standards, ethnic identity, and so on which is visible in the area studied. Cultural conflicts between communities can also lead to social exclusion. Social networks are designed to assist individuals in coping with poverty through personalized strategies, such as informal lending, food exchanges, mutual assistance for clothing and consumer goods, agricultural production, home construction, and childcare. Declining of such societal

networks, which are multifunctional yet virtually invisible, are a major source of poverty.

Along with that the village's tourism industry suffers greatly from a lack of infrastructure due to which the sector is only seasonally focused rather than the whole year and the people receive a single session's worth of benefits. One of the challenges to increasing tourism has been identified as the language barrier. People avoid communicating effectively out of embarrassment as they lack sufficient proficiency in Hindi, English or even Assamese languages. Also due to poor marketing, the tourism industry is not well known to many people. Excellent business planning must be done in order to take it to a bigger stage. If given the proper financial backing, the area's tourism potential can be increased, which will aid the locals in preserving their culture, traditions, heritage, art forms and other intangibles because, contrary to popular belief, preserving culture is not economically viable.

Environmental and Ecological Stress

Compared to other industries or business sectors, contemporary tourism operations are more geared toward environmental awareness and conservation. The local population as well as tourist groups both benefit greatly from the infusion of environmental consciousness brought about by tourism operations. However, development of the tourism industry without proper planning may be harmful to the ecology. Engaging in significant marketing initiatives in a location can have disastrous impact on environment as numerous types of pollution are produced by the tourism industry including deforestation, air, water and land contamination. The degradation of the original natural environment of the tourist site has been made possible by mass tourism in a number of ways, including the hotel and transportation sectors. The impact of modernization and globalization has propelled the tourism sector to unprecedented heights. Tourism and conservation can clash, especially when tourism has negative environmental implications.

According to reports from NGOs working in community-based conservation, the ecosystem of Manas National Park has come under great stress. Rapid surge in human population has been directly proportional to the pace at which environmental degradation has taken place. Increased demand for natural resources has depleted forest resources, with the forest cover shrinking fast in past decades. On

the ecological front, the region is prone to floods and soil erosion due to dams and changing of the river's course. Flooding has a cascading effect, since options for alternative livelihoods get restricted in the absence of livestock-rearing opportunities. That compels the villagers to increase their dependence on the forest, making the region more vulnerable to stone-cutting and sand and river mining. A significant area of the park, including the forest cover, has already been washed away by the release of excess water during floods. Wildlife activists and environmentalists have also raised concern over the sheer neglect of buffer areas of Manas National Park since it is in these areas that illegal activities are rampant due to lack of monitoring. The civil unrest in the 1980's and 1990's has had a tremendous impact on the local wildlife. Most militants engaged in illegal lodging and poaching to fund their activities. An increase in tourism-related activities might alert the relevant authorities to the need to safeguard that tourist destinations' natural ecosystem. From a broader perspective, the community-based conservation approach may be more effective. As it is considered a bottom-up approach which works at the grassroots level, and therefore, sustainable economic growth together with communities working for ecological goals can lead towards conserving the ecosystem as a whole. It is pleasant to note that some NGOs are already trying to involve the villagers as protectors by motivating them to save the forest. In a bid to understand the human-nature linkages to arrest the depletion and degradation of finite resources and solve the socio-economic problems of the communities residing on the fringes, various NGOs and advocacy groups have been organizing workshops and training programmes. The local communities are being engaged to step up anti-poaching efforts so that the wildlife can flourish. Ranging from fishery farming and dairy farming to bee-keeping and weaving, the locals are being trained in activities that will help in making them self-sufficient, resulting in the degradation of encroachment.

Globalization and the Destination Communities

The social cost of tourism must be paid by the societies and communities in tourist destinations in a variety of ways such as demonstrative effects, acculturation of local culture, dilution of institutions, rise in crime rates etc. The globalization of culture and tourism, the modernization of many cultural values

and resources and acculturation itself are examples of effects demonstrated by relatively wealthy and foreign visitors. These effects can seriously undermine the indigenous ways of life and eventually inspire locals to adopt and imitate them. Because mass tourists typically have no emotional attachment to the resources and people of the local community, they consume all of these resources without any regard, which eventually weakens the various social institutions and their structures including families, educational institutions and local governing bodies etc. Tourists' materialistic attitudes toward these resources have the potential to be exceedingly harmful to the local population as they may lead to child labour and the destruction of priceless natural resources.

Growing tourism within a destination community might accelerate the process of acculturation by allowing residents to regularly see and take in the socio-cultural practices of both domestic and international visitors. In result, traditional dance elements have been altered to accommodate tourists' timetable, financial needs and photographic requirements, allowing access to sacred buildings for people and cameras, regular wearing of casual rather than traditional attire etc. Tourism has spawned and accelerated globalization by eroding regional cultures and importing western influences from around the world. The modernization of the destination community in its numerous facets such as infrastructure, economy, social and cultural values etc. is another component of demonstration effect. The independent culture of the host destination is sacrificed in favour of modernization which takes the form of greater infrastructure, an improved economy, and a change in values. An increase in mass tourism from abroad and a materialistic outlook may be harmful to the customs and values that define the destination's culture and society.

The worst impact on tourism is the rise on crime. The prevalence of numerous social and legal offences inside that region may increase due to various tourist activities around remote locations. Numerous forms of crimes including prostitution, child labour, sexual assault and theft of expensive objects may occur. In the form of cultural heritage and pollution, tourism can have a negative cultural impact on the destination community. One of the main causes of these detrimental cultural effects is the rising rate of mass tourism in the vicinity of well-known cultural places. Ancient monuments and ar-

chitectural landmarks have been impacted by increasing mass tourism activity. Unchecked, unsustainable and mass tourism growth is strongly related to many of the worries about travel. Private companies dominate the tourism industry, which is driven by the desire to profit from the sale of experiences. Market-driven planning frequently overlooks the effects on the environment, society and culture, making it difficult to meet the goals of sustainable tourism. The end consequence may be an overexploitation of the local community's socio-cultural carrying capacity.

Conclusion

The sustained social and economic development of rural communities is the primary goal of developing rural tourism. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "India lives in its villages. If the village perishes, India will perish too", so to develop Indian economy as well as society, development of its village is a most important thing to do. In order to odder additional employment prospects for the local population, firstly, the sector should be expanded. It is necessary to take action to start up fresh, profitable projects that will involve an increasing number of industry participants. The government must provide assistance. Secondly, the expansion of tourism also depends on promotion. The sector needs more advertising and outreach. Without an effective promotion strategy, the tourism industry cannot grow sufficiently. To make Manas National Park a well-known tourist destination, the government, tourist companies and locals should work together. Thirdly, the development of the tourism business can be aided by the construction of the required infrastructure. The in-

dustry will always be in its beginnings if new infrastructure and the provision of fundamental necessities are not provided. The government and NGOs should develop detailed plans to construct a high-quality infrastructure system in the villages, conservation or the preservation of the endowed forest resources is the final but not the ultimate stage. Therefore, proper planning needs to be prepared with specific objectives. For long lasting tourism the people of the village should be trained in a proper manner so that they can get involved and benefit from it.

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