

CAN TOURISM TRANSFORM? Community-based tourism initiatives in India

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Tourism within India, especially in the rural context, is increasingly being seen as a way for elimination of human poverty and inequalities. Many rural tourism initiatives are being conceived within the framework of community-based tourism, which combines aspects of community development, poverty alleviation, cultural heritage and conservation.

Community based rural tourism is gaining popularity in India. The country's National Tourism Policy of 2002 by the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) announced its plans of spreading tourism development to rural areas: *'village tourism will be promoted as the primary tourism product of India; to spread tourism and its socio-economic benefits to rural areas'*. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture (MoT) defines rural tourism as, 'any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience'¹. According to Leena Nandan, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India, *"the primary objective is to ensure that the benefits of tourism reach every strata of society- people who live in the rural areas, in villages that have a USP for tourism, so that the socio-economic benefits of tourism are received by people who are not directly in the framework of tourism"*.

Since then the push of spreading tourism in rural areas has come from multiple directions - ranging from initiatives by the central and state tourism ministries and departments, forest departments, private tourism industry players and even nationalised banks – all willing to invest and loan. Amidst this there are also communities who have come together who wish to benefit from tourism, to be independent and build on their own resources. With many of these initiatives, have come many models focusing on various aspects. While most of these are structured around livelihood promotion there are also a few located within larger developmental objectives.

In India, tourism is viewed and promoted as a 'development paradigm' and a major engine for growth. However 'development' more often than not gets equated with economics, overlooking environmental, social, cultural and institutional dimensions. Especially in a rural context when the economics of tourism take priority, the impact is far greater. Rural India is faced with challenges of rising economic inequity, social discrimination and conflicts arising out of these, as well as differential and poor access to basic civic amenities & services. Therefore when we speak of tourism contributing to development we need to speak about it holistically – encompassing dimensions of ethics, equity, and justice, of access, local participation, empowerment, destination competitiveness and ultimately destination sustainability. A caveat to understanding tourism and development – rural tourism cannot be a one-stop solution for ensuring goals such as equity and empowerment. However this component is a valuable and critical one if one were to aim at people centred tourism.

When the Indian government aggressively positions and promotes tourism as a development tool it raises the hopes and aspirations of local communities who believe that tourism is going to be the answer to their problems. However the question remains – can tourism transform to something positive? Or is it the case that when communities adopt tourism they lose more than they gain?

¹ <http://tourism.gov.in/> accessed on 24 April 2008

To probe further into the question, two community based tourism initiatives have been taken up and analysed in this paper – The Endogenous Tourism Project and Mountain Shepherds Initiative. The initiatives have common threads – to see tourism as a means to achieving developmental goals of the environment and its people. However each is backed by a different institution and following different approaches for implementation.

1. Endogenous Tourism Project

One of the outcomes of National Tourism Policy 2002 was the Endogenous Tourism Project (ETP), an innovative response to the agenda of developing rural tourism. The ETP is a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiated in 2003 and being implemented currently at 36 sites across the country.

While the primary objective of the project is to focus on sustainable livelihoods, it extended beyond the achievement of mere economic objective of employment and income augmentation, putting it on a much larger canvas of community based action. The project aimed at a convergence of issues like sustainable livelihoods, gender equality, empowerment of women, youth and other disadvantaged sections and working towards cultural sensitivity and environmental sustainability. It premised that if tourism is to fulfil its promise of being a transformative agent, capable of changing the minds, values and behaviour of the tourists and the local citizen alike – as well as of providing a broad impetus to local economies throughout India, then tourism needed to be “radically altered in design and concept”. The project design in many ways has been a significant shift from the standard tourism projects implemented by the MoT in the past that were infrastructure-centric and infrastructure-heavy. It has an overall framework, which is ambitious, emphasising processes rather than products, and placing at the centre the notion of local communities taking the decisions related to tourism. Thus a unique feature and indeed core principle of the ETP is to examine and take further the links between tourism and development.

The initial focus of the MoT was on developing tourism-related infrastructure for the local community that would help promote tourism. However, key questions were raised on how the community was going to be assured of benefits through the infrastructure that was going to be built for them? It was recognised that rural communities having limited understanding and control of tourism, often lack the skills and resources to link to tourism. Further, interventions linked to capacity development and local institution strengthening would be important if benefits from tourism had to flow to those most in need.

Through the course of the ETP, the tourism linked infrastructure developed was supplemented and complemented by building & strengthening capacities of the communities to link themselves to tourism. Infrastructure development in the ETP fell into three broad categories. First those that had direct links to tourism (accommodation, restaurants, tourist information / interpretation centres), second those geared to overall village development and indirectly benefiting tourism (toilets, pavements, footpaths, street lighting) and third was an aspect of convergence of various schemes for the village so as to provide basic services and civic amenities in which they lacked. The capacities of community members were built by conducting training on varied issues - awareness, tourism linked skills and livelihood, alternative livelihood and institutional management.

Another critical component of ETP was institution building. The focus on institution building came later when issues came up of how synergies could be created between the infrastructure developed and capacities built and in relation to the management of tourism activity in the future. All sites attempted building an apex body – the Village Tourism Committee (VTC) and various sub-committees that will sustain the tourism activity.

To help implement the project UNDP and the Ministry brought in organisations, which would be able to support the community in capacity & institution building, and marketing while the district administration was responsible for infrastructure development. They also brought in specialists who could advise and assist on areas such as appropriate infrastructure development (panel of architects), institution building, waste management and business plans.

The project is in its 5th and final year of implementation. In some of the sites implementing agencies working with communities have helped them to understand, build capacities, manage and take charge of how tourism should be developed in their region. On the other hand, some sites find it difficult to engage the participation, imagination, and aspiration of the people for whom the project is meant. The ETP is witness to both the above scenarios.

So was the ETP actually able to address developmental goals?²

Some of the positives as a part of this process have been that tourism has helped provide a supplementary source of income for a few, conscientisation about the environment among the community, people have started taking pride in their heritage – in their clothing, food, customs & beliefs, lifestyle, building technologies but most importantly, at a few sites people who earlier did not have a voice (the marginalised) now do.

Data on actual increase in employment because of the ETP is still hard to come by as the project was in early stages in most sites. However there is considerable potential for employment opportunities created but how many of them will materialise in reality is yet to be seen. For example several groups have been formed for cuisine, hospitality and guiding but in actuality most of them are still not converting the trainings to income generating options. In some sites community members claimed that since the initiation of the project the number of villagers migrating to cities in search of employment has reduced.

Typically, in the process of tourism development the rich and powerful (and in some cases also non-residents) become involved with tourism projects, while opportunities for participation and benefits do not reach the marginalized sections of the society. The ETP project has tried to include the marginalized sections, backward castes and classes, women and poor to a certain extent. However, it is a contentious and complex issue whether a project such as this can really address the very poor. For e.g at one of the sites, a financial assistance scheme of Rs 35000/- each was given to build a bathroom and kitchen, as they are two of the most critical aspects a tourist looks for – a clean bathroom and a hygienic place where the food is cooked. The people that came forward to offer home stays were from the upper castes. Members from the marginalised community were not part of this group as they would not have been able to pay the high interest rate. It was therefore left to the community to come forward and all those interested were given incentives – on equal basis.

Whenever there is direct participation through employment of the weaker sections, this is generally driven by individual endeavours to reap the economic benefits tourism brings and to some extent on their financial and social background.

Another site that is running a successful tourism resort has addressed the issue of leakages and backward linkages and by a careful analysis brought down dependency on products (that are needed to run a resort – dairy products, laundry, training a person from within the community to take charge of managing the resort, etc) from outside the village to less than 50%. This increased the contribution that could be accessed locally.

² The conclusions presented in this section are based on information collected in relation to a project undertaken by EQUATIONS to document the various processes adopted while implementing the Endogenous Tourism Project at 10 sites.

At each of the rural tourism sites there has been some thought on a certain percentage of the income that will be a share of revenue from the various tourism related activities as contribution to the larger system. The VTC in most cases decides a certain percentage that will be given to the local self governing body / other committees for village development work. This varies between 5-10% of what they receive as tourism revenue. At some sites they have also started giving low-interest loans to the community. This, in turn also influences, how the group benefiting from tourism activities as individuals and groups interact with the larger village body. There are two aspects to it, one is in terms of monetary contribution from the profit earned to the village body/ other village development work, the other is in getting the concurrence of the village body on the activities, planning and future of tourism related work. However this is a concept, which as yet needs be concretised.

A desirable social impact of the ETP has been a sense of renewed pride in local culture and traditions, to reclaim their roots, value their culture, dress, cuisine etc. On the one hand there was a sense of renewed pride, while on the other a fear and a guarded approach to tourism. The idea of tourists, staying with them, becoming part of their everyday lives could have an impact as these are in a certain sense 'closed spaced interactions'.

Also while tourism is helping the revival of arts, with increasing demand there is pressure on the artisans to produce more of what will sell in the market. This leads them to shortcuts like the use of chemical dyes and fabric colours instead of the time consuming traditional colours. Excess of supply has also led to undercutting the price and thus profits.

One of the key impacts of the ETP has been the discussion and action around cleanliness, hygiene and waste management. As a result of assessing what the tourist needs, these rural communities have become more aware of the need for cleanliness and hygiene of their surroundings and have also adopted these changes in their lifestyles.

While the above have been aspects related to tourism development and its impacts, it is also critical to understand how communities have utilised the various components as provided by the project.

In the initial phases of the project infrastructure preceded capacity building. Along the way it was felt that in many cases it would have been useful had capacity building preceded infrastructure development. However it is not about one preceding the other but the synergy that needed to found between the two and how this can be made a more integrated process.

It was found that in most instances infrastructure was divorced from capacity building and has not gone through any rigorous institutional process. What is chosen for construction was almost pre-decided and the community has often had little say in it. This was a critical reason why community participation in the process of decision making on infrastructure development (what, why, where, design – how was it taken, how much money has been spent on it) has been relatively low at most sites. Construction has been a major source of mis-management in most of the places, with reasons being a plenty – either the community did not know when and where the money was spent or the implementing organisation deciding what needed to build or at another site the district administration spearheaded the construction in the first phase without any consultation or the structures that were build were of poor quality and unfinished. This at a few sites has led to the project being executed as two isolated entities resulting not only in huge loss of funds, but, more importantly, an adverse impact on the whole project exemplifying the dysfunctionality of a developmental planning.

However in comparison, the capacity building exercises though having a few drawbacks have been much more positive as they are largely conceived as a bottom-up process.

Capacity building while geared to acquiring specific skills was also seen as creating the space for building or articulating perspectives. The idea was to have a two pronged livelihood strategy – one which focuses directly on tourism and second which focuses on other livelihoods that can be strengthened which complement and supplement tourism. The complementing aspect ensures that the communities must not be over-dependent on tourism and the supplementing aspect ensures while one can strengthen and learn skills, tourism also has the potential to leverage that aspect, as tourism needs basic facilities (internet, provision stores) as well as exquisite products (craft). A number of capacity building programmes strengthened and also introduce new skills among the community. Trainings on skills organised were on weaving, on terracotta, bel-metal, hospitality, pineapple recipes, etc.

Only a couple of sites have been able to match their work plans of the infrastructure to be developed and to capacity that needs to be built. Only one after a period of 5 years has all four aspects (infrastructure, capacity, institution and marketing) of the project working in line, the fifth element of tourism contributing to village development is yet to be seen.

Institutions are primarily holders of ideas. In this project there have been two approaches to the formation of the Village Tourism Committee. One, the membership of the VTC was confined to the people who were thus far excluded from or exploited under the existing tourism industry, namely, the artisans, the craftsmen, the women, the youth and the other weaker sections of the village community. Since the objective is to empower the powerless and marginalised, the VTC was a potential space to challenge existing power structures. Having followed this approach, there have been instances when this has led to a situation of irresolvable conflict. The other approach was to open up the doors to all: the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak. In some sites this was believed to be a more pragmatic and effective method - to leave the choice of selection to the community and aim to avoid social tensions in the process of implementing the project.

The ETP aims at empowerment of disadvantaged sections of the community and therefore stands for social transformation and not mere social change. However in a project of this nature the dilemma always exists about the extent, to which it can really address, challenge and transform deep-rooted social inequities. Even though a lot of thought has gone into conceptualising this project by MoT and UNDP, what seems to be underestimated is the power of structural inequities in rural society. No development activity, supported from the outside, can avoid conflict. Anything that even attempts to empower the poor, through simple skills and exposure, are perceived as threats, since power gained by the poor is deference lost by the rich.

The ETP is not an isolated effort for the promotion of rural tourism- it is linked to the mainstream tourism industry. However, it goes beyond the use of available resources and proposes to create new resources, especially human, in terms of the enrichment of arts and crafts. Thus, on the one hand, it aims at sharing benefits using existing resources, and on the other, looks to create new resources and new social and institutional arrangements. It is, therefore, not confined to benefit sharing within the existing power structure of the village or the region but attempts to create new power relations. If however at times it has chosen to surrender to the existing power structure, the inputs from the project - both funds and skill, will benefit mainstream tourism. The benefit will not trickle down automatically to the disadvantaged sections of the village.

The ETP is still in the formative stage. The sites are at different stages of unfulfilled dreams but none of them have really taken off in the true sense of meeting the twin project objectives of tourism and development. How much “trade off” can and should happen between “a successful tourism project” and “commitment to social justice and development” is a dilemma at every level of the project that is yet to be sorted.

2. Mountain Shepherds Initiative³

In 2006, the Mountain Shepherds Initiative (MSI), a community owned and operated ecotourism venture, was formerly inaugurated in the vicinity of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve in the mountain state of Uttarakhand. The initiative was born of social struggles with Chipko (early 1970s), Jhapto Cheeno (late 1990s) movements and more recent efforts by the Nanda Devi Campaign to reclaim peoples land and forest rights. The Bhotiya community of the Niti Valley have been at the forefront of bringing justice, inclusion, and respect for natural and cultural heritage into the tourism debate.

Two seminal events have shaped the lives of the Bhotiya of Niti Valley – the 1962 India-China border conflict and the 1982 closure of the Nanda Devi National Park and later creation of the Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. While the former ended the age old cross-trade relationship with Tibet that had culturally and economically enriched the Bhotiya, the latter ended all mountaineering and trekking expeditions to Nanda Devi, one of the Himalayas' highest and most popular peaks. Both had devastating cultural and economic impacts.

In November 2000 a separate state of Uttarakhand (formerly known as Uttaranchal) was formed constituting the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh. By October 2001 the Uttarakhand Tourism Board had announced its policy proclaiming tourism to be a key sector in the growth and development of state. To take the tourism agenda forward the government decided to send a 'team of experts' to the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve to explore and assess whether the Reserve had rejuvenated itself and the possibility of initiating limited tourism activity.

This came as a bolt for the local communities still battling with the ban, who were disallowed from entering the park. This gave birth to the Nanda Devi Campaign. Sparked by the urgent need to ensure local control of the tourist trade, the campaign issued the progressive 2001 Nanda Devi Biodiversity Conservation and Eco Tourism Declaration to guide its future endeavours. The Mountain Shepherds Initiative, guided by this declaration, attempts to achieve a new relationship between tourists and local communities based on equity and mutual learning.

In 2003, the Indian government made major revision to the park rules that had strictly governed the Nanda Devi protected area for over twenty years. A partial reopening began allowing 500 visitors to enter a small segment of the park's core zone every year, although the peak itself would remain off limits. The environmentally sensitive plan also called for the employment of local guides and porters, although this was not accompanied by any job training. Considering the move an opportunity for the economic rejuvenation of the local community and to claim stake & benefit from their resources, the campaign turned its focus on capacity building, infrastructure development, creating a product line that was different and innovative and marketing for community-owned ecotourism in the local area.

While planning for the approach, the Nanda Devi Campaign initiated the establishment of Mountain Shepherd Initiative, a private company. The campaign emphasised on developing leadership skills of Himalayan youth, who in turn would eventually become the major stakeholders, a new community-owned and operated tourism company. It was felt that to make this a social experiment involving people only from marginalised sections, who maybe disinterested, will not work. To make it a successful business model it was critical to adopt the principals of choosing people on the basis of need, interest and ability. As a working

³ 2008 - Interview with Dr Sunil Kainthola & Dhan Singh Rana (Directors) & Govind (Member), Mountain Shepherds Initiative. Paper by Rajiv Rawat - The Mountain Shepherds Initiative: Evolving a New Model of Community-Owned Ecotourism.

method, they planned to build and establish direct networks, thereby avoiding middlemen and in turn reducing the leakage factor. This initiative is seen as one that will serve as a prototype of socially conscious and community owned tourism operations in the region.

Capacity building: Currently over 60 youths (both boys and girls) from various villages in the 3 districts of Pithoragarh, Chamoli and Uttarkashi have been trained in basic and advance courses in trekking & mountaineering, on flora and fauna, on the historical, cultural significance of places. The other trainings, which are in the pipeline, are - Yoga, Water Sports, Search & Rescue, Communication and Computers. However the participation of girls in the training has been low. This is due to the conservative outlook of the community. Most of these youth are school dropouts, unemployed but feel a connection with nature and well versed with the terrain. With tourism picking up in the region, the community also sees this as an opportunity to curtail youth from migrating to urban / tourist destinations in search of employment.

An area that they foresee participation of women is in developing souvenirs, in keeping the craft alive. For this they plan to encourage women to weave during the non-agricultural season. MSI has reintroduced vegetable dyes along with design inputs.

Infrastructure development: Two key motivations for tourists visiting the region are religious and adventure. The pilgrim and the adventurer do not expect high end comforts, but one of basic facilities like clean accommodation, toilets etc. An extremely innovative idea to solving the accommodation problem, without much investment is to use non-performing assets like properties or bungalows. Most communities in the region have a summer and winter home, at a higher and lower altitude. During summers (also the tourist season), the winter homes are vacant which are leased out to MSI. Currently in 2 villages they have initiated the concept of homestays and have a bed capacity of approx 40. MSI has also leased a 5 room property, near Joshimath, the closest town to the village as pilgrims may prefer staying in town.

Also as the other major activity of MSI is trekking and adventure, they needed high quality gear. In this endeavour, Mountain Shepherds was greatly assisted by American students from the Appalachian State University, who gathered and delivered a significant amount of mountaineering equipment through their successful "Gear for the Garhwal" project.

Product Line and Marketing: In 2003, the campaign designed its website with from well wishers. Through the campaign website and now MSI having one as well they plan to market the entire state and not just Nanda Devi region. Using new technologies and mediums the youth have been trained also in making short films and photography, which they will later upload as possible trek routes for marketing purposes. The group plans to move away from the usual trekking package and develop new product lines - exclusive packages for family adventure, yoga treks and trekking for independent women. In 2006, MSI planned an event that would draw international attention and formally launch the company. For this, organizers decided to hold what was coined the Inaugural Nanda Devi Women's Trek, by reaching out to the world's women mountaineers to pay tribute to the mountain goddess as well as the region's women who have played a central role in movements.

The Nanda Devi Campaign has brought both national & international recognition and with it a steady stream of visitors to the region. The initiative has over the years been supported by many individuals, groups, and organisations in areas of training, developing a website, product designing, documentation, adventure gear, etc.

By adopting tourism, the local community now have many more supplementary income avenues – homestays, guides, porters, cooks, driving a taxi, crafting souvenirs. For all of these they have developed a system of rotation so as to ensure an equitable distribution of

income. Also a system of backward linkages is put in place – for instance if one family is providing homestay facility, another family provides food supplies, and from a third the tourist is encouraged to buy souvenirs.

Apart from the monetary aspects, the accumulation of this specialised man power (basic and advanced mountaineering method of instruction, yoga, search and rescue) in these regions in remote villages is indeed an extremely valuable asset – which is now being hired from cities or metros.

Part of the profit that has been earned in the past years is being reinvested as microfinance for decentralized infrastructure development. MSI assists with financial aid to families to renovate their homes, build bathrooms and toilets, which can then be provided as a homestays. Out of the earnings from the tourists, the family will retain 50% and the remaining will be given to the company against the advance given. This in turn also promotes better hygiene practices among the villagers. MSI has also extended financial aid for purchase of vehicles, which will then be made to use by MSI when there is a need, otherwise the person is free to earn from that and more importantly is the owner of that asset.

Direct Shareholding: Mountain Shepherds Initiative currently has two directors who have been part of the campaign, who in the coming few years, would eventually give up a major part of the company shareholding to the youth to run and manage the company in the future.

Even this initiative is not free of its problems. As MSI is in its nascent stage and business not guaranteed many youth trained under MSI banner have moved on and joined other employment. People who were trusted to be given loans at times have not fulfilled their obligations of paying back. This initiative though community owned and controlled is ultimately a business venture, and therefore while the choice to engage was open to all members of the community only a few have come forward. Also though attempts have been made to involve participation of scheduled castes (marginalised community within the social structure) due to various reasons this has not happened -for example activities like cooking by SCs are not appreciated by other upper castes youth.

There are still many challenges, developmental lags and sustainability issues that lay ahead. The challenges are related to imparting further training to the youth in communicational English, briefings them on aspect of hygiene, food & water safety, trash collection, developing managerial skills and ultimately instilling self-confidence in them. The developmental lags that need to be addressed are about sorting inter-village rivalries, brining in greater equity and transforming this initiative from a people's movement mindset to business entity. To ensure sustainability of this venture, MSI plans to recover indigenous knowledge and skills, develop participatory benchmark studies and built- in monitoring systems to guarantee and work in line with the principles of the Declaration.

With the launch of the Mountain Shepherds Initiative, the Nanda Devi Campaign is attempting the monumental task of establishing a community-owned operation in keeping with its aspirations for a future without human exploitation and environmental degradation. The campaign hopes to implement its guiding philosophy in all aspects of tourism planning, especially in making mountain tourism accessible to all, regardless of age, gender, income, or ability. As a model, its success will have important bearing on the fate of the Himalayas and its people.

As compared to the ETP, the model followed by MSI is a slow process, one that is not bound by time, one, which has paced itself out slowly thereby allowing the community to accept and be reintroduced to tourism on their terms.

Can tourism address development priorities?

The concept of community-based rural tourism is still in its nascent stage with explorations on to shape the most appropriate models that can be adapted across different contexts/regions in the country. Tourism is emblematic of the paradoxes and challenges of modern development. Tourism projects are essentially a social and economic intervention in rural areas and it is quite likely that several challenges and conflicts surface. The dilemma always exists about the extent to which tourism can really address, challenge and transform deep rooted social inequities. Also it is idealistic to assume that tourism can be the one stop answer to these problems. A tourism project can only be one among the larger social realities operating there; it cannot address all problems of economy, polity, and society and therefore maybe partly achieve the development question.

Both case studies illustrated above – one backed by authority at highest levels in the country and the second backed by a peoples movement - were initiated to address how tourism could contribute to development priorities of the region. However 5 years down the line the indications are few and far between. It is interesting to note that the Ministry of Tourism speaks of tourism and development, which has been off its radar, while the people's movement speak of tourism and business, arguing that to match the goals of development with tourism is a tall order. That being so, unlike most other “mainstream” tourism projects, these initiatives attempted to address the question of community benefits rather than individual benefit is a perspective shift in itself.

While initiatives such as these are taking time to find their bearings, what is happening in parallel is the ‘hijacking of these ideas’ amounting to the shortening or in many instances over looking of processes to achieve the volumes of ‘quick fix’ tourist destinations. When it moves from a process oriented to a project mode approach, we are then brought back to the question of whether development is only about economics and numbers or about a larger frame.

These are complex questions and dilemmas that in our country we are still grappling with - whether tourism can truly transform a place or pay mere lip service to the idea of development – this only time and strong intentions will tell.

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