

Flights of Fancy: The ground truths of seaplanes in tourism

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Environmental pollution and degradation is a global concern of prime importance and constant efforts are being made throughout the world to address the issue through research, awareness programmes, dialogues and government policies and plans. However, the efforts seem to have failed miserably across the globe, as the indicators showcase its further deterioration, especially in the last 50 years due to unregulated anthropogenic interventions. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report, 2005 warned the world about the rising consumption of ecosystem services, the pattern of which is unsustainable in many cases and which will continue to soar as a result of a likely 3-6 fold increase in global GDP by the year 2050 even as global population growth is anticipated to slow and level off in mid-century.

The race among the countries to become developed has led to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation subsequently leading to mass exploitation of natural resources. Development is popularly considered synonymous to economic upliftment and undermines its effects on the social, cultural, and environmental front of the country. Mega projects such as dams, power plants, and road networks and other large infrastructure projects are being stressed on across the country by both, state and the Central Government. Due to the steep growth of population, new avenues of settlements and transportation are being looked for by the governments.

India is investing immensely on various fronts, with tourism being a critical area. There is a popular assumption that tourism brings revenue and contributes to development and also helps creating jobs for the citizens, which further legitimising its growth in the country. India has always been known as a hub of pilgrimage and heritage tourism with the forest, mountains and coast based tourism becoming popular. Coastal tourism in India is not just confined to Goa and Puducherry but almost the entire peninsular coast has become a tourism hub. The coastal states have focused on tourism development and huge infrastructural investments have already been sanctioned which is reflected in their budget plans and policies. One amongst these investments is the seaplane service, which has received a lot of attention in the recent years.

The Government of India introduced seaplanes in the Andaman Islands in 2011 to provide a fillip to the ongoing tourism in the islands. The service aimed to open new places for tourism purposes which have been inaccessible to the tourists due to the lack of transportation facilities as construction of airports is not possible in the smaller islands. Seaplane service in mainland India was introduced for tourism purposes as an added attraction / new experience and to reduce travel time of the tourists in the state of Kerala in the year 2013. It received strong criticisms and protest by the local fishing community who claimed that the service shall deeply affect their livelihoods and the marine ecology of the region and the service was immediately stalled. No impact assessments were conducted before the services were introduced. Maharashtra introduced seaplanes services in August 2014 from Mumbai to Pawana Dam, Lonavala, and further expansion of routes has been planned. Like in Kerala, here to there have been protests from the local fishermen and environmentalists on several grounds including the environment and livelihoods of the fisherfolk. A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed early this year in the Bombay High Court. Goa recently conducted a test flight amidst strong protests from the fishing community and plans to launch the service after July 2015.

With many states moving ahead to create an additional attraction through an additional mode of transportation that further opens up ecologically fragile regions to promote tourism, there are reasons to worry. Few studies have been conducted to assess the seaplane's environmental impact anywhere in the world and in many cases these are independent studies carried out by private seaplane operators themselves. Not just in India but also in other parts of the world this has not been a welcome move. Sri Lanka and Ireland witnessed similar oppositions by the local fisherfolk on similar grounds resulting in a long struggle. The Negombo lagoon in Sri Lanka was chosen as a suitable site for the seaplane operations but the local communities especially the fisherfolk of the region came together and fought for the 'Right to Feed' (of the fishermen) and the 'Right to Breed' (of the fishes) in the lagoon. The Sri Lankan

government has taken a decision to move the project to another site from the Negombo lagoon after months of protests by the fishing communities and many local groups.

The cost of infrastructure for initiating and maintaining the services is very high thereby attracting the high budget tourists. The seaplane operations will involve water bodies whether they be lakes, rivers, dam reservoirs, or the ocean and the amount of the area required for the operations is massive as there needs to be a water strip approximately 2000-2500 feet (radius of 1 sq km). It means that expanses of the water body will be made off limits from fishing activity, for operational purposes. Apart from occupying the fishing space of the traditional local fishermen, the project shall also harm the environment by the discharge of waste or the leakage of fuel into the waters threatening not only the aquatic life but also the health of organisms consuming it. The noise created during the operations will also affect the visitation of migratory birds. The dam reservoirs and the lakes are being used for the operations that serve public good but in this case are being allotted to private companies for profit making. The local communities' access to water body involved in seaplane service will be restricted.

Knowing the implications of seaplane tourism and the past experience of Kerala where the fisherfolk opposed the service due to its adverse effects on the environment and livelihoods, why is the government keen to establish seaplanes tourism in the country? For the enjoyment of a handful of people from the affluent section of the society and the private gain of the operators, should the local communities and the environment suffer? There is a need to critically analyse seaplane tourism and the motive behind its promotion because of the various factors that seem problematic which continue to remain unaddressed.

On this Environment Day it is proposed that Sustainable Development be conceived not only on paper but in spirit. Extensive damage of the environment has already been done, any further delay would come with a huge price towards disrespecting the nature and the environment. Tourism which is considerate of the environment and the local communities is crucial and a top priority. The introduction of tourism, its conception, form, and space should lie in the hands of the local people and all projects should go through vigorous impact assessments before being implemented.

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