

Forests, Communities and the "Green India Mission": Promises and Failures of Ecotourism

By Equations

Market-based conservation schemes seek to mobilise and channel private sector contributions for the sake of environmental conservation and to resolve various environmental problems. They are actively propagated as an innovative approach "[t]o attract private contributions, introduce sustainable resource management practices compatible with the Rio Conventions' objectives and principles, and contribute to the development of economic opportunities in poor, rural areas of the world" (Paquin/Mayrand, 2005). These schemes are promoted by a large variety of governmental and non-governmental actors as a possible new and innovative way to finance the conservation of forests and other ecosystems¹⁹. In India, ecotourism is one such scheme being promoted because it speaks the language of conservation.

Tourism is a sector that is built and relies on natural capital (both human and ecological) and this makes issues of sustainability very critical. Globally, the new interest in tourism-environment interrelations is particularly notable with rising concerns about the links between tourism and climate change. In this context, an interesting trend is evident when notions of sustainability lead to class dimensions of tourism. Under the banner of sustainability, policy makers clamour for "high-value low-volume" tourists. This is a recurrent theme in several tourism policy and planning documents in India. This suggests a form of neo-colonialism disguised as green, as it defines those who deserve to travel solely by their ability to spend.

India's National Action Plan on Climate Change

The Government of India announced its first ever National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in June 2008 to identify measures and steps to advance climate change-related actions in its domestic sphere. Eight National Missions in the areas of solar energy, enhanced energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, sustainable habitat, water, the Himalayan ecosystem, increasing forest cover and strategic knowledge for climate change were incorporated under the Plan by the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change, reflecting India's vision and domestic strategies for sustainable development and the steps it must take to realize it.

According to the NAPCC, the Green India Mission (GIM), being one of the eight National Missions, was launched to enhance eco-system services, including carbon sinks, to be called Green India. "The Mission on Green India will be taken up on degraded forest land through direct action by communities, organized through Joint Forest Management Committees and guided by the department of forest in state governments", the NAPCC document stated. The Mission has two focused objectives – increasing forest cover and density as a whole of the country and conserving biodiversity and recommended implementation of the already announced Greening India Programme.

The Green India Mission document envisages tourism as offering an alternative livelihood to communities dependent on natural resources in coastal ecosystems like mangroves and in

¹⁹For example, in his note on Incentive Measures to the 11th meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) the Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity states that "market creation has often proved to be an effective means for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity".

forests. The implications of this are many. Today, community-driven tourism initiatives are still playing a marginal role and do not receive the impetus they need from the Government through schemes and incentives. In the absence of this communities will not be able to compete with big operators with the capacity to acquire large tracts of land and convert them into private forests which are then promoted as tourism products in themselves. In fact, it is not mere schemes that are needed to ensure that tourism is community driven. What is needed is a change in the way ecotourism is envisaged – where communities are central to the venture and not merely profits of large tour operators and income for the nation. Furthermore, starting a tourism enterprise might not even be in the interests of the community and the state would need to recognise and respect this.

Existing tourism development does not involve the Local Self Governance Institutions (LSGIs) in its decision making process, planning and implementation. All the ministries' plans and schemes should factor in a mechanism to get approval of the LSGIs before a tourism project is initiated. Apart from mega projects, this should hold true even to hotels, lodges, resorts and other infrastructure to be developed in villages in eco-sensitive areas. Given the strict laws regarding forest and coastal governance in the country, the impacts on local communities reach much greater proportions.

Further, indigenous practices of forest conservation will be lost to market-based conservation mechanisms. The GIM talks of not only increasing the forest cover through the usual afforestation programme and plantations, but emphasizes improving the quality of forest cover in 4.9 million ha of forest and non-forest areas representing diversity in forest density, tenure and ownership. This includes 1.5 million ha of moderately dense forest, 3 million ha of open forests and 0.4 million ha of grasslands. The eco-restoration of degraded open forests with a target area double that of the moderately dense forest cover will have



more profound impact on the forest communities. The majority of the forest people in India today have shifted to or are being expelled to these open forests which are of less intrinsic value and considered uneconomic (Lahiri, 2009). Forest communities extract fuel wood, fodder, and small timber from these forests and graze their cattle. GIM targets these areas for large scale afforestation programmes with fast growing native species and closure to grazing on rotational basis thereby preparing the ground for displacing the forest communities

from these last forest areas, so depriving them of their habitat and livelihood options.

The Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF) has emphasized improving the quality of forest cover and restoration of eco-systems while remaining silent on the continued deforestation through mining, indiscriminate industrialization, mega infrastructure projects and the active promotion of wildlife tourism in forest areas in the name of ecotourism.

Green India Mission represents an institutional mechanism to promote India's REDD+ ambitions²⁰. REDD+ "has specifically opened the possibilities for the country to expect compensation for its pro-conservation approach and sustainable management of forests resulting in even further increase of forest cover and thereby its forest carbon stocks." (MoEF, 2010). The MoEF is unscrupulous in openly declaring that forest certification system will "enable unbridled access to ethical trading and market arenas with price premiums." It does not matter whether the same forests and resources belong to the forest communities.

Ecotourism and Community Development

Ecotourism is increasingly being seen as a driver for the eradication of poverty through economic development of communities. Impacts of ecotourism are seen in its multiplier effects, ability to create livelihood alternatives, governance and land use patterns. Ecotourism is also believed to create an enabling environment for conservation as well as generating a monetary resource base for conservation. Conservation education for tourists is also seen as an important outcome of ecotourism. Ecotourism in forest areas is primarily located in or around protected areas and areas identified as Critical Wildlife Habitats including Critical Tiger Habitats, which has resulted in opposing interests and conflict between the adivasis²¹, the state and other actors.

Over the past eight to ten years, there has been a rapid increase in the number of ecotourism enterprises at well established existing destinations. Further, newer destinations have also emerged. Today, it appears that ecotourism is at its peak and it is important that there be extensive debates to understand the implications of ecotourism and to facilitate the positive impacts while mitigating its negative impacts. For ecotourism to be sustainable, the following process needs to be followed:

- Ensure prior informed participation of all stakeholders
- Ensure equal, effective and active participation of all stakeholders at all stages in the ecotourism projects
- Acknowledge adivasis'/other forest dwellers'/ local communities' right to say "no" to tourism
- Development – to be fully informed, effective and active participants in the development of tourism activities within their communities, lands and territories
- Promote processes for adivasis'/other forest dwellers'/local communities to control and maintain their resources, culture and rights.

Ecotourism and Conservation

Tourism may generate funds for conservation related activities. However, estimating the costs of regeneration and the sources of funds received by the State Forest Department is a difficult task. Identifying and segregating different cost components is a challenge since administrative costs overlap various activities including conservation and management.

Fundamentally, the issue here is to examine whether income generated from ecotourism activities goes back to the Forest Department. Currently, all earnings from forests (Non

²⁰ REDD = Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, see www.un-redd.org

²¹ The word adivasi literally means 'indigenous people' or 'original inhabitants'.

Timber Forest Products – NTFP, timber, entry fees, etc.) go into a common pool wherein all non-plan income of the state is parked, from where allocations for different expenses are made. There is no way to ensure that the incomes from tourism are ploughed back to the Forest Department for regeneration work. Therefore, the only directly traceable benefit is salaries people receive when they are employed at tourism sites. This creates a rupture in the idea that ecotourism can be used as an income generation method for forest conservation. Madhya Pradesh is the only state where each national park has created a fund into which money collected through gate receipts feeds.

It has been found that almost 70 percent of income from wildlife tourism is from the fees collected at the entry gate, which means the larger the number of tourists, the greater the earnings of the Forest Department. This is in complete opposition to the concept of ecotourism. Additionally, the large sunk cost of tourism infrastructure developed at the sites becomes redundant since many tourists prefer day visits to overnight stays (Swaminathan/Purushothaman, 2000).

One of the aspirations for ecotourism is conservation education of the tourists. However, not much has been done by way of actualising this potential. A part of the conservation education is to also recognise the role that local communities have historically played in the conservation of the country's natural resources and the continued struggle to do this in the light of a fast developing nation. This will instil respect for local communities in the tourists and will change the perspective with which they are viewed. The change in the mind set of tourists towards local communities would also positively influence their behaviour vis-à-vis local communities, which today is oppressive, patronising and condescending.



The mainstream notion of conservation overlooks and does not acknowledge the role that is played by adivasis and other forest dwelling communities in conserving the forests as well as the diversity. Forms of conservation are also very often indigenous in nature and are tied with the religious and spiritual beliefs of communities. Some of the conservation practices that have been recorded are the existence of sacred groves, "navai", a harvest festival in Western Madhya Pradesh, during which the "gayana" is performed. The "gayana" chronicles the evolution of humankind. It is an oral tradition teaching the future generation their past and possibly indicating their future by describing the symbiotic relationship that exists between man and nature and the importance of this relationship for sustenance. This instils in the younger generations a respect for nature while also teaching them about their rights to the forest²²

Ecotourism, Employment and Livelihoods

The forests, in the form of protected areas, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, are the main tourism product in ecotourism. The creation of these areas has caused land alienation and displacement in large numbers. This change in land use pattern and land dispossession, lack of access to forest resources has led to social injustices like loss of dignity and livelihoods

²² See "In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley (Studies in Social Ecology and Environmental History) by Amita Baviskar, Oxford University Press, 2005

of the adivasis and other forest dwellers. Therefore, in stark contrast to the claim that ecotourism furthers community development, it in fact bases itself on a paradigm of forest conservation and protection, which has taken away the existing livelihoods of people.

It is true that tourism development generates employment opportunities for local communities. However, the lodge or jeep owners are usually not from the region. They are more often than not from nearby cities/towns and sometimes from as far away places like New Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. The income thus generated from tourism is taken away from the region and into the bigger cities. There is also the issue of self-determination here. People who used to own land have, due to poverty, been forced to sell out to the companies and become employed as guides and drivers if lucky, but usually end up working as security guards, gardeners, waiters at the restaurant, etc. Therefore, the mere generation of employment, though an often repeated argument, is highly overestimated as it does not counter the disempowerment and lack of dignified life that the adivasis experience.

Today, community-driven tourism initiatives are still playing a marginal role and do not receive the impetus they need from the government through schemes and incentives. In the absence of this communities will not be able to compete with big operators with the capacity to acquire large tracts of land and convert them into private forests, which are then promoted as tourism products in themselves. In fact, it is not mere schemes that are needed to ensure that tourism is community driven. What is needed is a change in the way ecotourism is envisaged – where communities are central to the venture and not merely profits of large tour operators and income for the nation. Furthermore, starting a tourism enterprise might not even be in the interests of the community and the state would need to recognise and respect this.

Ecotourism needs to go beyond community welfare to being community-centred if it wants to achieve its goal of conservation and community development. In the context of livelihoods, ecotourism can only generate employment and for communities it is employment at the lower end of the hierarchical corporate ladder. There is a very important contradiction and difference between livelihood and employment.

Livelihood is a much broader sociological term rooted in the concept of social justice where culture and identity form its basis and is dependent upon the landscape and ecology. It is connected with community and property rights indicating dignity, control, empowerment and sustainability apart from income generation.

Employment on the other hand is an economic term denoting work done and money earned. It is individualistic, governed by a set of rules between two individuals/entities where capital dominates and is irrespective of any location/landscape/ecology and pays for labour that produces and reproduces for consumption for another and does not consider the issue of sustainability.

Community Involvement

The role of community involvement maybe spread over a broad spectrum from minimal tokenistic involvement of the community to community-based ecotourism. Along this spectrum are several levels of community involvement:

- Tokenism – employing members of the community as drivers, tour guides etc.
- Informing – where communities are informed about the ecotourism development being planned and are involved through employment in the ecotourism activities

- Consulting – where the communities are consulted with but where the aspirations of the community might or might not be addressed. In this instance the community would have the space to influence decisions while not being a formal part of the decision making process
- Collaborating – where communities are seen as equal partners in the ecotourism development planned and are formally part of the decision making process. The community would then have control over the impacts as well as the benefits of ecotourism.
- Ownership – where the community owns the enterprise, which becomes the capital of the community. Where the pace, nature, forms, stakeholders are all decided by the communities and all others involved are supporters of the enterprise.

Studies show that unless there has been either proactive response by the community or intervention by an outside agency, most ecotourism developments see the following impacts which need to be taken into account while planning for any ecotourism programme:²³

- The nature of ecotourism activities are similar across almost all ecotourism sites. Clearly the activities do not take into account the cultural and social specificities of communities in the region. Neither do they take into the account the special skills that each of the communities has in terms of conservation.
- Displacement of adivasis from protected areas, which are then later promoted as ecotourism destinations.
- Objectification of adivasis by the government in their promotional material and literature, the tourism industry and by the tourists in the way they see the adivasis.
- Very often ecotourism activities impinge on resources that are otherwise used by the adivasis for livelihood, health and other purposes making them self-reliant and self-sufficient.
- Construction of tourism infrastructure like roads, accommodation structures like permanent tents, cottages etc. further damage the environment and also are a threat to the adivasis.
- The use of AC tents and other construction material result in increased energy consumption, where the resorts have captive generation of electricity, while very often the villages nearby have not yet been electrified/see frequent power cuts.
- Carrying capacity/limits of acceptable change are very often not taken into consideration while planning ecotourism initiatives.
- Solid waste produced due to tourism initiatives is not properly managed impacting both the environment as well as the people.

Legislation for Ecotourism in Forest Areas in India

India's forests are governed by a series of acts, policies, regulations and guidelines. However, there seems to be little application of these in the context of tourism. While only the guidelines for the declaration of Eco Sensitive Zones talk of specific guidelines for tourism, from some of the sections like Section 4 (2) (f) of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, the boundaries for the operation of

²³ Equations (2010): Note on Community Involvement in Ecotourism, www.equitabletourism.org/readfull.php?AID=1226

tourism enterprises can be deduced. In protected areas, reserve areas and areas declared as critical wildlife habitat, local governance is almost non-existent as all decisions regarding the villages are taken by the Forest Department.

The (Draft) Guidelines for Ecotourism In and Around Protected Areas issued by the Ministry of Environment and Forests on June 2, 2011 lay out a detailed set of framework guidelines on the selection, planning, development, implementation and monitoring of ecotourism in India. Recognising however, that India's wildlife landscapes are diverse, these guidelines should be necessarily broad, with specific State Ecotourism Strategies to be developed by the concerned State Governments, and Ecotourism Plans to be developed by the concerned authorities



mandatorily taking into account these guidelines. The following core values should be central to the guidelines: people-centred, accountable, democratic/participatory/equitable and non-exploitative, which mandatorily will have to be reflected in the state ecotourism strategies. Roles and responsibilities should be enumerated for different stakeholders: State Governments, Protected Area management, tourist facilities/tour operators, local communities, temple boards and general public. Types of tourism activities allowable should also be enumerated.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 has not been considered while formulating the draft guidelines. It needs to be ensured that the final guidelines will guarantee that the provisions of this key Act are upheld in the context of the governance and regulation of tourism and rights of forest dwelling communities.

What Needs To Be Done

It is important that forests not be seen merely as providing ecosystem services alone but as an ecosystem which comprises of the people living in and around the forests including their historical relationship with the forests, the flora and fauna. By turning ecosystems into tourism products, they are also made vulnerable to the market (demand and supply). This is done without taking into consideration the communities living in these areas who have for centuries been the custodians of the resources and who have a symbiotic relationship with them. Further, the life-cycle of the ecosystems themselves is not considered while planning for tourism development in these fragile spaces.

Ecotourism, when practiced correctly, has the scope to link to a wider constituency and build conservation support while raising awareness about the worth and fragility of such ecosystems in the public at large. It also promotes the non-consumptive use of wilderness areas, for the benefit of local communities living in and around, and dependent on these fragile landscapes. The first benefit from ecotourism must go to the local people, and in the long-run, capacity-building should be carried out to forge a sustainable partnership between the forest department, tourism department, tourism professionals and local communities. The long term goal is for communities to own the ecotourism enterprises through active participation in their governance.

It is important to promote ecotourism with the strictest of regulations. While the Ministry of Environment and Forests has issued draft guidelines, it is important that these are finalised after taking into account the responses from the communities and civil society organisations. Finally, there is a dire need for a revised policy on ecotourism, the responsibility for which should lie with the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Environment and Forests.

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Equations is a research, policy, advocacy and campaigning organisation working on tourism and development issues in India since 1985. Large parts of this paper are drawn from "Green India Mission: India's REDD+ Action Plan to disempower and evict forest communities from their own homelands" by Souparna Lahiri and "Forests, Communities And Ecotourism" by Swathi Seshadri.