

Tourism and Water Rights

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Water is a natural resource which unfortunately has been taken for granted, a visual of a water body gives an impression of a vast, never ending repository of natural resource. However what needs to be kept in mind is that freshwater comprises only 2.5% of the total volume of water on earth, additionally, 70% of this freshwater is in the form of ice and permanent snow cover in the Arctic and Antarctic regions¹. Less than 1% of the entire freshwater is available for human consumption – to sustain life for a colossal population of 7 billion people. The consequences of an unregulated pattern of consumption of water will be predominantly felt by those communities who are dependant on natural resources for their livelihoods. These communities, over the years have evolved efficient natural resource management mechanisms. However, the needs and the access of these communities to the natural resources are being sidelined when developmental projects come up which most often undermine the sustainable management practises.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) claims that natural resources are the foundation by which rural poor can overcome poverty². This however gets challenged by another school of thought being endorsed by policy makers that tourism is a effective means to overcome poverty. As a driver for development, the tourism industry is being promoted as a one of the key tools to achieve the millennium development goal of eradicating extreme poverty. At the G20 in 2012, "the role of travel and tourism as a vehicle for job creation, economic growth and development" was recognised and the parties committed to "work towards developing travel facilitation initiatives in support of job creation, quality work, poverty reduction and global growth" (G20 Declaration 2012)³.

However, the issues that are not addressed at the policy level is the resource intensive nature of the tourism industry and severe implications of the activities the industry has on the communities living in the vicinity of these developments.

Tourism is a resource centric and a resource heavy industry. To meet the tourists demands, communities' dependant on commonly shared natural resources are severely affected. As tourism grows, the competition for resources between the tourism facilities and the local communities increases.

Today, water is one of the most central resource consumed by the tourism industry. The ideal “holiday experience” with its luxury services places a high demand for water. Conservative estimates by a study on water equity in the tourism industry reveals that small scale tourist facilities require 573 litres of water/ per room/ per day as compared to luxury facilities which require 1,335 litres/ per room/ per day in Goa.⁴

Tourism’s Water Footprint

The tourism product is an assemblage of travel, accommodation and other services, which depend upon people, place, culture, and environmental resources, including water². The high pattern of consumption of the tourists has been established in a few studies. According to UNESCO, an average 18-hole golf course can consume upto 2.3 million litres of water a day.⁶ When on vacation, tourists are known to consume more water than what they normally do, for instance in Benaulim, Goa a five-star resort consumes 1785 litres of water per guest per day while a neighbouring resident consumes just 14 litres of water per day². Water scarcity in a region does not imply that the tourism industry will function any differently, as it continues to offer its tourists unlimited water for multiple swimming pools, lush green lawns, landscaped gardens with exotic species and golf courses – while the basic water requirements of neighbouring communities are often not met.

It is when tourism begins to claim an inequitable share of the resources that it becomes unsustainable and its benefits of economic upliftment are negated with a community’s alienation from the natural resources.

While the tourism industry to some extent is conscious of its water footprint, they take on a vainglorious approach – initiatives adopted usually are water conservation measures within the hotels. Despite adopting conservation measures such as water recycling, awareness initiatives for the tourists and water treatment units, the hotels continue to consume more or else the same volume. A more widespread approach taking into consideration the access to the neighbouring communities is rarely seen.

Privatisation of water resources is another aspect that needs to be considered. It has been observed in coastal areas that stretches of the beaches are securely guarded by security hired by the hotels to keep community and general tourist at bay so as to offer privacy to their guests. The communities lose the power of local ownership and control over the water body in time.

Cidade de Goa a five star hotel in Dona Paula, Goa has encroached upon a public beach which was privatised and accessed only by the hotel staff and the tourists for years. In 2010, the Supreme Court ordered the demolition of all structures which obstructed public access to the beach. This section was subsequently regularized by the Goa’s Chief Minister⁸ so as to prevent the hotel from incurring a loss and by regularising the irregular. This example illustrates how power differentials in a region dictate the access to natural resources where sometimes, big corporations have controlled the access to natural resources in direct violation of existing laws.

Vembanad Lake, the largest lake in Kerala became one of the prime tourist destinations with a large number of tourists, foreign and domestic, visiting the place during the Nehru Trophy Boat race. Tourism flourished drawing tourists because of the calmness and beauty of the lake⁹. The unregulated infrastructure developments around the lake began to interfere with community’s rights over the natural resources – when local people were forbidden from fishing and collecting shells and speedboats damaging the fishing nets. Boat rides with tourists’ and their prying cameras also violated the privacy of women. The lake was a space for women to take a bath, wash utensils or just a space to gather and spend sometime together. This was lost with the incursion of these developments. In time, the numbers of houseboats increased on the lake as there was a greater demand for rooms but a restriction to build more on the land and therefore a natural extension to the lake by the resort owners further closed in on the community.

Another area which has seen a rise in tourism is around protected areas – wildlife tourism. In these fragile ecosystems the communities were initially the force protecting the natural resources, however, the conservation laws in our country have pushed the local people to the periphery of these areas. The inroads made by the tourism industry has seen mushrooming of resorts and hotels around protected areas, offering large farmhouse type getaways in the wilderness. However demands of the high end tourists who visit these facilities has led to the development of swimming pools, air conditioning, spas and dipping pools at these resorts.

A high-end resort built on indigenous peoples farm land along the Banjar river, in Madhya Pradesh have created a water body within their premises by pumping the water from the Banjar river to fill this water body. Even in years

when the monsoon has failed, and the levels of water are low in the river the facility continues pumping, reducing and polluting the water upon which the local communities were dependant for their daily needs. It is ironic how the areas which are being protected subject an additional stress on the natural resources and biodiversity to cater to the needs of the tourist.¹⁰

When a high end resort put up tents at the river's edge, with the core area of the Kanha National Park at the opposite bank, villagers were of the opinion that they could not continue their daily river based activities (bathing, washing buffaloes) for fear of "disturbing" the tourists.¹¹

Water Rights in India

The basic human right to "pollution free water" and the right of "access to safe drinking water" has been derived from Article 21, the Right to Life, of the Indian Constitution. Initially addressing pollution of water bodies, the Supreme Court and several high courts have issued verdicts which recognises the access to drinking water as a fundamental right in India. It is extremely important to strengthen the Fundamental Right to Water with "equitable access and supply" of water to the communities, to dissuade developmental drivers from resorting to unsustainable consumption of and inequitable access to water.

The 73rd Constitutional amendment allowed for devolution of administrative and political powers to the States to recognise Panchayats as institutions of local self governance. This allowed for decentralised governance and management of natural resources. Though there are legal provisions to govern the community conserved resources, it must be implemented through building of social capital, processes and systems. Guidelines defining the access and supply of water to the industry stakeholders and the communities need to be adopted.

Unfortunately, as seen in the Goa beach case study above, the power differentials result in the big corporations over-consuming the resource resulting in significant reduction in access and supply of water to the local communities. Though there are laws which punish and even call for shutting down of industries when the basic rights of a community is violated, the notion that tourism can improve a local economy has blinded the governing bodies against the numerous violations.

While tourism development can offer jobs to the members of the local communities, the access to their basic livelihood needs may be hard hit when the resorts / hotels snatch away their basic rights. The situation becomes only worse when the State which is supposed to be the guardian of natural resources, endorse and protect tourism establishments which exploit these resources.

Responsible Tourism

The idea of Responsible tourism which is gaining ground in India and on the agenda of discussions and conferences organised by the tourism industry (some of whom may have been the very ones responsible for the privatisation of these resources!).

For tourism to deliver on its promises the needs and aspirations of the local communities should be taken into account¹².

Drawing from the Global Sustainable Criteria, the Ministry of Tourism, India has finalised the Sustainable Tourism Criteria for India (ISTC), for accommodation service providers and tour operators. The criteria recognises the importance of measuring an accommodation provider's water consumption and indicating the source of the water. Additionally, it also warns against "jeopardizing the provision of basic services such as water, to the neighbouring communities"¹³.

The negative impacts of tourism have almost always been felt by the local communities residing in the area – the same communities whose livelihood – according to the UNWTO – should benefit from the array of opportunities the tourism industry offers. The need of the hour is to institute a process which entails equitable sharing of water between the communities and the tourism industry; the necessity to enforce existing laws and develop laws which condemn exploitation of natural resources that is extremely high.

The Way Forward – Democratic Governance

The kind of tourism we witness today destroys the ethos of equity and democracy.¹⁴ Water allocation and access cannot be governed by corporations ignoring what is practised for centuries. The ineffective role of governments to regulate capacity in tourism destinations has forced the communities to struggle for their basic water needs, enforcing existing laws and decentralisation of power to local governing bodies for democratisation in decision making has to be adopted.

Tourism industry must be held accountable to those communities whose access to water and its quality has been severely compromised by them. The power balance needs to shift to the sustainable use and access to natural resources and in favour of rights of local communities over the “imperatives” of tourism.

End Note:

1 http://www.unwater.org/statistics_res.html

2 Community based Natural Resource Management, how knowledge is managed, disseminated and used, *IFAD, 2006*

3 <http://www.wttc.org/news-media/news-archive/2012//g20-recognises-travel-tourism-driver-economic-growth-first-time/>

4 Water Equity in Tourism, *Tourism Concern, 2012*

5 George and Varghese, (2007), “Human Rights in Tourism: Conceptualization and Stakeholder Perspectives in Electronic Journal of Business Ethics and Organization Studies, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2007) (http://ejbo.jyu.fi/pdf/ejbo_vol12_no2_pages_40-48.pdf)

6 <http://www.unesco.org/water/news/newsletter/155.shtml#know>

7 <http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/index.php/news/30/61/PRESS-RELEASE-End-water-injustice-in-Goa-tourism.html>

8 Calling to Account – Image and Ethics in Corporate Accountability, *EQUATIONS 2011*

9 Vembanad Lake and Tourism, *EQUATIONS, 2007*

10 Nature, Markets, Tourism – Exploring Tourism's Claim of Conservation in India, *EQUATIONS, 2009*

11 Ibid

12 Mapping Issues and Challenges of Ecotourism, *EQUATIONS, 2011*

13 http://tourism.gov.in/writereaddata/CMSPagePicture/file/marketresearch/studyreports/Sustainable_Tourism_Report_for_MOT-GOI-%20FINAL%20APPROVED.pdf

[http://tourism.gov.in/writereaddata/CMSPagePicture/file/marketresearch/Survey&Study/sustainable%20tourism/SustainableCriteria\(1\).pdf](http://tourism.gov.in/writereaddata/CMSPagePicture/file/marketresearch/Survey&Study/sustainable%20tourism/SustainableCriteria(1).pdf)

14 Commons, People and Tourism, *EQUATIONS 2012*