

New Tourism Policy Will Harm Local Communities and Environment, Say Activists

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Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, New Delhi:

As many as 51 civil society organisations working across a range of fields linked to travel and tourism have expressed fear that the central government's draft National Tourism Policy (NTP) 2015 will "autocratically centralise" the sector and leave no room for local communities in the decision-making process. They allege that the policy has been drafted keeping only the interests of foreign tourists and corporates in mind.

The decision to bring in an NTP was made by the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) in May 2015 to increase India's share of foreign tourists from 0.68 per cent to 1 per cent by 2020. As per a news report on this past March 8, Union Tourism Minister Mahesh Sharma said, "The draft NTP has got the approval of all concerned ministries. It will go to the union cabinet now for approval. After the cabinet approval, it will be effective. We are expecting it will be done very soon."

This has caused worries among many organisations, which hail from various parts of the country and come under the Bangalore-based umbrella body called Equitable Tourism Options (EQUATIONS). In a statement, EQUATIONS said:

"Our key concern is that the policy aims to centralise power by placing tourism, a state subject, in the Concurrent List, thereby undermining the scope of any meaningful participation of the state tourism institutions, district councils and by the constitutionally mandated elected bodies like panchayats and municipalities... What is starkly lacking in the draft policy is the acknowledgement of the people whose homes and backyards are promoted as tourism destinations. The policy doesn't concern itself with the impact of tourism on the people, their lives and livelihood." [full statement here]

A copy of the statement was sent to the MoT.

Concerns voiced repeatedly and ignored

Speaking to The Wire, Aditi Chanchani, Director, EQUATIONS, said, "Even within the tourism industry, it is the private and formal sector which has been kept in mind. The unorganised sector and casual workforce within the formal sector, which the industry mainly employs, have been completely forgotten." Chanchani said representatives of the organisations "rushed to Delhi after seeing the March 8 news report, to know what happened to our responses to the clauses of the draft NTP. We submitted the responses on May 9 as asked by MoT."

She said that all the organisations under EQUATIONS were in touch with the ministry even before the draft policy was formulated.

"In December 2014, when we learnt that the ministry was coming up with a policy, we wrote to the then tourism secretary expressing our concerns. On March 23, 2015, we submitted a list of generic suggestions to him. When the MoT put the draft policy in public domain on May 1 and sought suggestions from stakeholders, we submitted a more detailed critique of the clauses. The present tourism secretary, Vinod Zutshi, however, sought even more detailed suggestions from us – which we submitted in July, 2015. After that, even though we wrote many times to the ministry, but got no response. And then we saw the news report on March 8 that the ministry sent the draft policy to the cabinet for approval."

Rajesh Ranjan, Senior Research Officer, EQUATIONS, said, "We met the tourism minister on March 9 itself but he directed us to his personal assistant who seemed to know about all our communications with the MoT. We wanted to meet Zutshi but were told that he was out of the country. It was clear in that meeting that none of the concerns we put across on behalf of the local communities had been incorporated in the NTP before forwarding it to the cabinet for approval."

The MoT put the draft policy in public domain on May 1 and sought suggestions from the stakeholders till May 10.

Ranjan said: "There were less than ten days to put across our responses to a 56-page document. Still, we worked hard to submit our concerns to the Government on time, because the people in tourism destinations, in the unorganised sector and casual workers have struggled constantly to have their voices heard in the formulation of this policy – while the big business have ease of access and the ear of the ministry at all times."

He added: "In one of the meetings, a senior MoT official told us that since India receives only 0.6 per cent of the international tourists (6.97 million), the need of the hour is development and promotion of tourism and not regulation. But we ask, what of the 1,145 million domestic tourists who are not taken into account in calculations of the draft policy?"

The trend of formulating a new tourism policy is also being mirrored at the state level so as to align with the centre, Chanchani said. "Between 2015-16, nine states came up with new tourism policies of which five (Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, and Jammu and Kashmir) are states where the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and its allies are in power." Early this week, the Arunachal Pradesh government, formed recently by the rebel Congress MLAs with BJP support, has also brought in a new tourism policy.

Abuse of the local

In the statement submitted to MoT on May 11, the organisations argued:

"Tourism is not just a holiday. Local economies become dependent on tourism which slowly strangles traditional occupations like agriculture, fishing, pastoralism, arts and handicrafts. Land and beaches get taken over construction of tourism infrastructure affecting farmers, adivasis and fish workers. Artisans are co-opted into the tourism industry and often forced to compromise on their art to deliver cheap souvenirs. Then their social costs of tourism such as abuse of women and children, trafficking, child labour etc. because of tourism. India has already experienced the many negative fallouts of unplanned and unregulated tourism but the draft policy seems to only concern itself with bringing more foreign tourists by focusing only on infrastructure and promotion of places."

Speaking to The Wire, Father Maverick of the Goa-based Society for Responsible Tourism, a signatory to the statement, gave several examples of how local Goans making a living from tourism are threatened by corporatisation:

"Take the local taxi drivers. Big taxi companies are taking over their jobs. The bond locals can develop with tourists, the experience that they can give to a visitor, can't be replaced by the faceless big companies. Or take the government's policy on lifeguards. Earlier they were government employees and now the service has been privatised. So they are at the mercy of private players. There is no job security. Even the shacks policy of the government is flawed. It brought a model from Gujarat while the Goans have their own model of shacks. Locals build each shack in a different way, they show their weaving skills through the shacks and now there is a model they have to follow."

Chanchani stated that, "The party's policy in the 2014 manifestos sees the public-private partnership (PPP) as the vehicle for the promotion of pilgrim tourism in the country. Many state tourism departments are already looking at the model to restore and adopt historical and cultural assets into tourism products. This is a problem, as it will lead to large tracts of land being acquired where the regulation is with para-statal bodies. The schemes in the draft policy speak of slum upgradation, development of natural water bodies, golf courses, building of convention centres, aquamarine parks, shoreline development, and more. Where does this development fit in with the idea of sustainable development?"

In the joint statement, the organisations placed two demands. One, since the NTP will be the only directive-giving document for the sector, it needs to be given the same consideration as the passing of a legislation and therefore be brought to parliament for a discussion and a wider consensus. Two, a change in the mandate of the MoT should be reflected in the Second Schedule of the Government of India (Allocation of Business) "based on research and ground realities, privileging local community benefits and local economic growth."

Sustained attempts to contact the union tourism secretary and joint secretary Suman Billa by The Wire failed to elicit any reply.