

Tourism and Plastic: Exploring the Contours

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The threat that plastic poses to the health of the planet has been raising alarm bells for some time now. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), about 8 million tonnes of plastic is dumped into the ocean every minute, making our oceans a plastic broth. We buy one million plastic bottles every minute, a large quantity of them ending up in our forests, beaches or mountain tops. More than 15,000 tons of plastic waste is generated in India alone every day, it did not come as a surprise when the theme for the World Environment Day, 2018 was announced as #BeatPlasticPollution.

India is hosting this year's World Environment Day and as a part of this, people across the country have shared stories of local campaigns and efforts made towards reducing plastic pollution, many of which are linked to tourism. Tourism's popularity has been growing over the years. The sheer increase in number of tourists, who visit beaches, forests or mountain tops for pleasure, has also increased the plastic waste in these areas. Goan beaches littered with plastic and paper and mountain gorges of the Western Ghats becoming landfills have been manifestations of tourism. Sometimes, tourism has also brought in plastic and other waste to remote areas that were previously not accessed by outsiders. We have looked at some of the efforts that have been made to beat plastic from tourism.



To deal with the issue of waste in general, few years ago, the Government of India initiated the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). The genesis of this Mission is in the Ministry of Tourism's (MoT) Campaign Clean India (CCI) which was initiated in December 2011. This Campaign was an outcome of a study conducted by the Ministry in 2009, which highlighted "poor hygiene and sanitation conditions, ineffective solid waste management systems and lack of hygienically maintained public amenities as impediments in boosting tourism in India". During the immediate years after the launch of the Campaign, it remained ineffective. In August 2015, the government re-initiated the Campaign, which over a period of time was subsumed under the SBM, which is now implemented by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

The Ministry of Tourism has made multiple efforts to contribute to the Mission. Tourism promotion got woven into SBM posters that showcased icons such as the Taj Mahal and India Gate. The Ministry drew up a plan to conduct cleaning programmes in its offices and persuaded classified hotels and tour operators to adopt circles and roundabouts. The MoT also launched a campaign to keep 15 tourists sites clean and promised to add another 30 sites to it. The plan was to rope in celebrities to spread the message of cleanliness in the 15 chosen sites. As a launch for the campaign, the Tourism Minister

was photographed wielding a boom and sweeping up leaves at the otherwise spic and span India Gate premises! Corporate houses were also invited to take responsibility of cleanliness in some tourists spots as a part of their CSR activities. Given the role of the Ministry as the regulator of tourism in the country, the effort of the Ministry has been rather limited to littering and garbage. This is disappointing, especially given the huge contribution that tourism makes towards plastic pollution. More serious efforts appear to have come in from other Governments at city or state levels and sometimes from individuals.

Under the SBM scheme, cities and towns have competed for the 'cleanest city' tag. Panchgani, a popular tourist hill town in Maharashtra, has been given the tag of the third cleanest city. The Municipality has taken efforts to ensure 100% source segregation, collection and processing of solid waste. The landfill that was used to dump all the waste of the town has now been converted into a tourist point known as Swachh Bharat point.

Another effort by a State Government has been the case of Sikkim. Sikkim's story is one that has also been featured on the website of the UNEP, in the run up to the World Environment Day. As early as 1998, Sikkim made serious efforts to stem the plastic pollution in the state when the dumped plastic bags blocked streams and waterways and caused a landslide that killed 27 people. Sikkim has done away with single use plastic bottles in Government offices and events. But, the state is finding it hard to tackle the problem of plastic bottles that tourists buy and use frequently.

There have also been attempts by individuals to tackle plastic pollution in other tourist areas. In Kodaikanal and Shimla, volunteers have taken up plogging that is, picking up waste while trekking or jogging along forest trails. Pangot, a picturesque town in Uttarakhand, no longer throws all the plastic and wrappers that tourists bring in, over the gorge. A group of citizens, hotel owners, school children and a local organisation have come together to put in place a system for segregation and management of waste.

While these actions move towards a sustainable solution, they ignore a big part of the problem itself - the tremendous pressure from a growing tourism industry. Let us examine the 3 cases of Panchgani, Sikkim and Kodaikanal.

Kodaikanal has a population of about 36,000 people according to the 2011 census. But it sees staggering numbers of tourists, which has increased exponentially over the years: from 20.5 lakh in 1999 to 32.8 lakh in 2009 to 1.3 crores in 2014. The rapid increase in tourist footfalls has resulted in unplanned and unregulated urbanization, which has brought in problems like water scarcity. During peak tourist season, Kodaikanal is unable to meet the demand for fresh water. Kodaikanal also has inadequate sewage treatment facilities, air pollution caused by the massive influx of vehicles and prime forest areas cut up to make new roads. In hills and mountain areas where trekking is a popular tourist attraction, newer routes are being opened up through forest areas to accommodate the growing number of tourists. This, when combined with the tourists' love for the conveniences such as disposable plates, spoons, straws and plastic bottles, only compounds the problems of waste. Plogging may clean up the routes and mitigate some damage to the environment, but, it would be like fixing a leak, without seeing the flood. While the efforts of concerned individuals are commendable, the state cannot ignore its responsibilities to check unplanned growth of tourism.

Take the case of Panchgani; with a population of about 14,000 persons as per the Census 2011 data, it also faces tremendous pressure from tourism. In the year 2014-2015, this small hill town received around 1 lakh tourists. Tourism has been increasing over the years and this has caused loss of vegetation, increase in town area, pressure on resources such as water and electricity and problems of littering, pollution and traffic jams. One must also consider that this hill town is part of the Western Ghats range of mountains and is a fragile ecosystem. So much so that Panchgani was declared an Eco-sensitive zone in 2001 by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change and accorded special protections. Right now, Panchgani may have managed to put in place a system of handling waste that accounts for 100% segregation at source but any

increase in level of tourism, will bring the problem right back to the beginning, especially with the boost that tourism is getting with the promotion of newer festivals like the strawberry festival.

Sikkim may have been a torch bearer that recognised the importance of dealing with plastic pollution very early on. By sustained efforts, it has been able to influence the people to adopt environment friendly practices such as carrying cloth bags while shopping. But, by its own admission, Sikkim has not yet been able to address the challenge that tourism brings in. Meanwhile, tourism in Sikkim has been growing at a fast pace, more significantly in the last three years. The tourist footfalls in Sikkim has increased from approximately six lakh a year in 2011 to seven lakh in 2015 to fourteen lakh in 2017. This would also mean that tourism's contribution to the plastic waste in Sikkim is only increasing. Sikkim will have to look at its own capacities to handle the increasing tourism, of which handling the waste generated would be a part, and then plan and regulate tourism accordingly.

For any sustainable method to beat plastic pollution, Panchgani, Kodaikanal or Sikkim will have to understand their own tourism carrying capacity and assess the volume and kind of tourism that it can sustainably handle. Simply put, tourism carrying capacity is a complex concept that considers the question how much tourism a given area can sustain without irreversible degradation of the area. An assessment would have to consider the kind of activities for tourists such as trekking, cycling or safaris in diesel run jeeps, the tourist behaviour, the other local economic activities which are important to the local people such as agriculture or fishing, the fragility of the environment such as presence of rare or endemic species and many other place specific factors. Tourism Carrying Capacity is a holistic way of understanding how much tourism a particular place can hold, without impacting other important activities of the place. The capacity of a place to handle plastic waste by looking at consumption of plastic and the disposal of plastic, the capacity of the place to segregate waste and the capacity to recycle plastic waste, would form a component of the tourism carrying capacity. The tourism carrying capacity becomes an important tool for planning and management of tourism. Tourism will then have to be planned and managed according to the capacity of the area.

Tourism contributes to a significant portion of the plastic waste that the world is reeling under. This is true of India as well, but there is very little acknowledgement of this problem, which is evident in the MoT's superficial engagement with the issue under the SBM, without trying to address the crux of the problem. Symptomatic solutions like picking up trash or providing dustbins would only take us that far. Places like Panchgani, Kodaikanal or Sikkim are a step further than most other tourist places in India. However, they would have to engage in a deeper assessment of how much capacity they have for tourism to answer the question of how best they can beat plastic pollution.