

UNDER THE GARB(AGE) OF TOURISM

EQUATIONS
21 March 2017

Majestic mountains, thick forests, an unmatched biodiversity- all of these make the Western Ghats very popular among tourists. But tourism, if not done sustainably, could also bring with it a host of issues which lead to degradation of the environment.

Take the case of Mahabaleshwar; a hill town, spread over 90 sq km, surrounded by thick forests in Maharashtra. It is known for its breathtaking view of mountains and valleys among leisure tourists and for the ancient temple of Kshetra Mahabaleshwar, among religious tourists. The forests of Mahabaleshwar also have villages of forest dwelling communities. Mahabaleshwar receives an astounding number of 16 lakh tourists a year, who far outnumber the town's population of 13,393 persons.

Predictably, garbage poses a massive challenge. According to the Municipal Council of Mahabaleshwar, about 7 metric tonnes of garbage are generated in a day. How does this small town manage all this waste?

Mahabaleshwar has a large landfill, in the middle of a quiet forest, just outside the town. The landfill is a pile of mixed, unsegregated garbage, being worked on by a couple of earthmovers. There have been repeated attempts by the Municipal Council to ban plastic in Mahabaleshwar, but plastic is omnipresent.

The landfill at Mahabaleshwar

Garbage collection itself is not easy. To reach the famed view points of Mahabaleshwar, tourists have to walk through forest areas and these are often littered with plastic bottles and snack wrappers. As a part of the Joint Forest Management, local youth have been employed to regularly sweep up the forest paths that lead to viewpoints. It was high up on one dizzying view point that Akash, a local youth, employed by the JFMC, pointed out to a dangerous looking edge of a cliff. He told us that plastic is carried far by the wind and he has to trek down steep cliffs to collect the waste. Another local trekking enthusiast shared that hotels and dhabhas frequently pushed garbage bags over the cliffs, littering valleys far beyond Mahabaleshwar. A forest floor choked with plastic would surely cause harm to the flora and fauna of the forest.

Mahabaleshwar's challenges of just one aspect of tourism, garbage generation and disposal, is staggering. It will also have to address complex issues such as loss of forest cover to resorts and hotels, impediments to exercise of forest rights, chemical farming of strawberries etc.

Mahabaleshwar is only one among hundreds of tourist places that litter the Western Ghats. In the interest of the Ghats, perhaps it is time we thought about ways to make tourism sustainable, democratic and equitable.