

Sustainability is a choice – if we have the courage to make it

EQUATIONS

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Declaring 2017 as the year of Sustainable Tourism has once again served to highlight how unsustainable mainstream tourism is. The peak tourism season this year, saw local residents from many “destinations” across Europe on the streets, protesting. The Venetians, the Spanish – resisting a tourism that was ruining their cities, resisting the knock-on effects of rising rent, over crowding and pollution. They were angry at the loss of a place that no longer felt like their own but one that is constantly changing to accommodate the demands of the burgeoning tourism industry.

Research on tourism had already identified these patterns as far as forty years ago. De Kadt's (1979) questioned whether tourism produced sufficient gains for developing countries; whether economic returns were commensurate especially in light of the larger adverse social and cultural effects. Doxey's irritation index showed how attitudes of local people towards tourism can change over time – going through stages of euphoria, apathy, annoyance to antagonism, which is an open expression of anger about the negative impacts of tourism that they had to bear.

In India organised resistance to tourism impacts were evident in Goa in the early 80's when the Goans opposed the 'big other', be it the golf courses, holiday villages, five-star hotel, charters or even tourists who were changing the social fabric of the place. However tourism planners, policy makers and the industry have chosen to turn a blind eye to these trends and it has been business as usual.

Lets explore one angle of this sustainability debate. The Union Budget this year declared the creation of 5 Special Tourism Zones (STZs). This is a model that has always received support by the centre and states through its policies since 1992 (when it was first proposed in the National Action Plan on Tourism) but the Budget points to a major push that was not seen in the past. Coupling this with land pooling schemes, that enables the quick consolidation of small land holdings; would aid in the acquisition of large tracts of land to build high-end tourism infrastructure.

On the ground however challenges against the STZs has had a long history. A recent example is the struggle by local communities in the Gorai-Manori-Uttan area against the Recreation and Tourism Development Zone (RTDZ) in Maharashtra. This project covering 7 villages in the Dharavi Beth (island) proposes to convert large tracts of lands into private property to further interests of the tourism industry. On 24th July 2016, over ten thousand fisher folk, farmers, shopkeepers, people engaged in tourism, gathered at a public meeting to protest the RTDZ. They fear the destruction of their traditional occupations, the acquisition of their 'commons' (lands/ponds/spaces used for drying fish and owned by the village as a whole) will destroy their environment and threaten their livelihood.

A small victory is that the state's Urban Development Department in March 2017 denotified the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority as the Special Planning Authority for the region. It is now under the Mira-Bhayandar Municipal Corporation. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution gives power and space to the local communities to participate and decide about the development in their areas, which is not the case when they are under a Development Authority, as that is not constituted of elected representatives and designed to function in a centralised manner. However the larger struggle against the RTDZ continues.

Another example of how tourism development impacts local communities adversely is from the Loktak lake in Manipur. Loktak is the largest fresh water lake in the north-east region, located 40 km from Imphal. The uniqueness of the lake are the phumdis or islands of floating vegetation, because of which it is becoming a popular tourist attraction. Over the years the livelihoods of several communities of the lake has already been snatched as there is a prohibition on indigenous fishing methods and local agricultural practices. They have been displaced due to military operations and with the construction of a hydroelectric project. The local residents of

Sendra (near the lake) now fear possible eviction of the entire village with the announcement of the Integrated Cable-Car, Ropeway and Lakeside Development, Loktak Lake, which aims to promote wide scale tourism activity in the area.

The stories of victories and successful struggles are what keep peoples hopes and spirits alive. Right from the early victories in Goa, to the successful struggle of adivasis in Nagarhole national park in Karnataka against a luxury resort, to the more recent withdrawal of plans of a mega-tourism project of a ski village in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh, are clear pointers to the unsustainability of such projects that are dismissive of local peoples rights to community resources, and a flagrant violation of the law.

India will continue to see resistances against unplanned and unregulated forms of tourism which stem from the anxiety and anger about the reversal of roles converting the main players of the local social and political system into mere spectators, and the takeover of their resources and decision making by a set of powerful others.

Striking the balance between a thriving tourism industry that is sustainable and offers local benefits and rights requires skill, political vision and commitment. It can only be achieved with purposeful and concerted efforts of governments and tourism industry and requires long terms strategies and processes. Planning and regulating tourism, and recognising that it has to coexists with processes that sustain environment and peoples rights requires far-sightedness and a social justice perspective.

To safeguard sustainability in tourism we need wisdom and courage. We have to learn from our mistakes, We have to make fresh choices, as we ask the question: ***Who really benefits from tourism?***