

SIGNIFICANCES AND PROSPECTS OF ECOTOURISM FOR RURAL POPULATION: A STUDY OF KALIMPONG DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is a form of rural tourism that appeals to our ecological and social consciousness. Kalimpong, which has a tremendous prospect to be considered as an ecotourism hub, is the newly formed district of West Bengal and previously was one of the four sub-divisions of Darjeeling district. The region is located on the northern part of West Bengal. The name Kalimpong is derived from *Lepcha* word where Kalim means *King's Minister* and Pong means *Stronghold*. Kalimpong is located at an altitude of 4,100 ft. Because of its relatively lower altitude compared to Darjeeling or Gangtok, the weather is milder and pleasant for most part of the year. Therefore the region is suitable for those tourists who are looking for pleasant climate combined with magnificent views of Kanchenjunga, other Himalayan snow peaks and lush greenery.

In comparison to Darjeeling or Sikkim the travel and tourism industry in Kalimpong is not as developed or famous but recently after the introduction of rural tourism in the form of ecotourism by Mr. Sebastian Pradhan the tourism industry in Kalimpong took a whole new turn. Since the district of Kalimpong is comprised of mainly rural areas hence the initiation of ecotourism brought a great deal of positive significance in the life of rural population of this area. Hence, this paper is a humble attempt to highlight the significance of ecotourism in the lives of people residing in rural areas. Further some recommendations have also been suggested regarding the future prospects and possibilities of ecotourism in this region. This paper is based upon both primary as well as secondary data. There are various outcome of the study and the most significant being is that eco-tourism has brought a great deal of positive changes in terms of financial stability in the lives of the people residing in the rural locality of Kalimpong district.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Kalimpong, Significance, Rural Population

1.0 ECOTOURISM: AN OVERVIEW

Ecotourism is a type of "Rural Tourism". The term "Ecotourism" is perhaps the most misunderstood term in travel and tourism industry. So, to understand the concept of ecotourism, the word must be first defined. So,

ecotourism is defined as “*responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people*” (TIES, 1990). For example; travelling and visiting a particular forest or a village is not termed as ecotourism unless the visit benefits the environment and population of that particular place (Subba, 2014).

Ecotourism is a solution to environmental preservation only if it is carefully thought out and regulated. To do otherwise is to further endanger the natural areas and indigenous cultural attractions, not protect them as envisioned (Kiper, 2013).

According to Tugba Kiper, ecotourism is about (Kiper, 2013):

- Environmentally responsible travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas,
- Travel in order to enjoy, study and appreciate nature,
- The promotion of conservation,
- Combining sustainable development with the natural environments,
- The use of natural assets and resources in ecologically sensitive areas to create unique visitor experiences with minimal impact on the area.

According to the Government of India Guidelines the concept of ecotourism is defined as “any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially and promoting interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. It is multi-faceted and may entail farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism and eco-tourism” (Mallick, Sanyal, & Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

Rural tourism has certain special characteristics, like (Mallick, Sanyal, & Mukhopadhyay, 2016):

- It is essentially an activity or a group of activities which takes place in the countryside,
- It is experience-oriented,
- The locations are sparsely populated,
- It is predominantly in natural environment,
- It emphasizes seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions.

2.0. STUDY AREA: A BRIEF PROFILE

Kalimpong district the newest district of West Bengal and was the former sub-division of Darjeeling district. The area is considered as “Queen of Hills” for its scenic beauty. It is due to the beautiful peaks, forests, rivers and the climate that this region has gained lot of interest among the tourists world over. The region is

also a fortune house to exotic flora and fauna and is being considered an eco-tourism hotspot. This area offers a perfect gateway to the junction in the lap of the nature. Though tourism sector was there in Kalimpong from the very beginning but the inception of ecotourism is quite recent. It is only during the early 21st century that ecotourism flourished in this area. But after the introduction of ecotourism this sector of tourism gained huge success. It's probably due to the reason that the tourists prefer to connect with natural environment directly. The concept of ecotourism has also brought great opportunities for the people of rural areas because the major rural population of Kalimpong belongs to the category of Below Poverty Line (BPL).

The major factor or the person who have led to sudden boom in the eco-tourism in this area is Mr. Sebastian Pradhan. It was he who introduced the concept of eco-tourism in this area. In recent years other factors that have led to the flourishing of tourism industry in the rural areas are the efforts of local government as well as local communities. The work of different NGOs such as ATREE, EDC, WWF etc. have also contributed to some extent.

Today after the introduction of ecotourism in rural areas of Kalimpong like Reshi, Lava, Kaffer, Selery Forest Village, Lodaygaon etc have gained much recognition. The tourism sector is not only flourishing in these areas but the population of these areas are also benefitting financially.

Table 1.0 Profile of Kalimpong District

REGION	AREA (sq.km.)	POPULATION
Urban	12.25	59,461
Rural	1041.25	1,92,181
Total	1053.60	2,51,642

Source: (India, 2011)

As we can see from the table the major portion of the district of Kalimpong is under rural area. The major population of these rural areas has to live with the meager salary they receive from either the tea plantations or cinchona plantations. Hence the introduction of ecotourism was kind of boon to the rural areas of the district.

3.0 OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

After the initiation of ecotourism in Darjeeling Himalaya a sort of revolution came in travel and tourism industry. Lots of opportunities came up for the people living in rural areas. Hence, the objective of this paper

is to highlight the significance of ecotourism in the life of rural population in Kalimpong district. Further some recommendations have also been suggested for the future prospects and possibilities of ecotourism in this area.

To fulfill the above mentioned objective several ecotourism spots like Sellery Forest Village, Burmaik Cinchona Plantation, Munsong Cinchona Plantation and Echay Forest Village was visited to observe the present scenario of ecotourism. To collect the primary data the method of purposive sampling was used where home-stay owners, the local population and the people who are directly or indirectly was involved with eco-tourism was interviewed using open-end questionnaire. Secondary data was also collected through different journals, publications, reports, articles, internet resources and organizational websites.

4.0 SOME MAJOR POTENTIAL ECOTOURISM HUBS OF KALIMPONG DISTRICT

The district of Kalimpong is not as famous as the neighboring Darjeeling district in travel and tourism industry but this area is slowly changing into a ecotourism hotspots due to its

- Quiet and peaceful nature
- Great panoramic view of river Teesta, Kanchenjunga; the third highest peak of the world, Sikkim and Darjeeling.
- Less congestion as compared to Darjeeling
- Availability of different varieties of natural flora like Pine, Orchids, Ezeliya, Black Cardamom, Broomstick, Cinchona, Rubber plant, *kokomhendo*; a small deciduous tree, poinsettia etc.
- Availability of different varieties of fauna like deer, bear, leopards and different varieties of birds like pheasants, cuckoos, minivets, flycatchers, bulbuls, orioles, owls, partridges, sunbirds, swallows, swifts and woodpeckers. In fact, according to some tourists this place could be a great birding spot in future.
- Beautiful and unexplored natural environment.

Based upon these given characteristics following are some of the rural areas of Kalimpong which in future with proper planning can certainly transform into ecotourism hotspots. These areas have a major potential to turn into eco-tourism hotspots because these places is located in remote areas, is endowed with beautiful landscape and the most important of all these areas are surrounded by ample sum of flora and fauna.

4.1 Lolaygaon

Lolaygaon is a quiet and peaceful mountain hamlet located in Kalimpong district. This area is surrounded by beautiful forest. Lolaygaon is located at an altitude of 5,500 ft. and is surrounded by towering pine and cypress trees. Several locations in the village offer sweeping views of Kanchenjunga range. One can also see

a range of orchids and other flowering plantations here. It is also a great place for bird watchers. Other major attractions of this village are Canopy walk (Hanging Bridge), *Jhandi Dara* viewpoint from where one can have an amazing view of sunrise and VIP Bungalow View Point (Bhattacharya, 2017).

4.2 Lava

Lava is the base and the gateway for the famous Neora Valley National Park. The village lies at an altitude of 7,700 ft. and the whole area is surrounded by dense coniferous forest. The forest area around Lava is a paradise for bird watchers. There are several varieties of birds in this area like Blue Ribbons, Fulvetta, Finch, Wren Babblers and lot more. Lava also attracts a lot of trekkers. Apart from natural attractions Lava is also famous for Lava Monastery (the original name is Lava *Jamgyong Kongtrul Monastery*) (Bhattacharya, 2017).

4.3 Rishyap

Rishyap is a tranquil, small rural settlement of the Lepcha community in the mountainous landscape at an altitude of 8,500 ft. Rishyap is an integral part of the well known Neora Valley. Although this village is a relatively new tourist destination compared to several others in the vicinity, it is still a virgin spot clothed in forests of pine, birch, fir, colorful rhododendrons and orchids. The village also offers a wonderful view of Kanchenjunga and many other Himalayan snow peaks. At night the village offers an amazing sight of the sparkling lights of Gangtok and the small town of Pedong (Bhattacharya, 2017).

4.4 Sillery Gaon

Sillery is a quaint sleepy hamlet in the mountains with abounding nature, laid-back village life and magnificent views of Himalayan range including Kanchenjunga. The village has mystic and picturesque slanting tinned roofs cottage-type houses having a backdrop of pine trees. The village is known for its short distance but beautiful trekking routes to *Ramitey* View Point, *Tinchuley* View Point, Damsung Fort, *Hanuman* Top and Silent Valley (Bhattacharya, 2017).

4.5 Ramdhura

Ramdhura is a peaceful hamlet located 17 kms. away from Kalimpong town. The village is a cinchona plantation and hence the whole village is surrounded by cinchona plants as well as pine and conifers. The village is especially famous for its beautiful view of Kanchenjunga and River Teesta. In fact it is said that it is among some of the very few places in India from where one can view a mountain peak and a river at the same time.

5.0 FINDINGS

The findings of the present study are divided into two parts. These findings are based upon both primary data that was collected during field survey as well as the secondary data.

The first part of the finding deals with the significance of ecotourism for the population residing in rural areas. Apart from the importance of eco-tourism, the positive effects that have brought to these areas after the introduction of eco-tourism have also been discussed.

The second part deals with the future prospects of eco-tourism in the area.

5.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF ECOTOURISM FOR RURAL POPULATION IN THE AREA

Though ecotourism in the rural areas of Kalimpong are no more than a decade old but this kind of rural tourism revolutionized the tourism industry not only in Kalimpong but in different parts of whole world. Ecotourism has played a significant role not only financially but also in several different ways in the lives of rural populations of Kalimpong district.

Hence based upon the observations and conversations with the villagers and owners of hotel and home-stays following are the significant changes that have brought to their respective villages after the initiation of ecotourism.

5.1.1 New Business Ventures

Ecotourism has generated new business opportunities for the villagers. The villagers who are not involved in the tourism industry directly has also benefited after developing close relationships with tourist facilities where local food and wine can be used as part of the tourism offering in the locality. In the rural areas of Kalimpong it is often seen that several people belonging to rural population make their living by selling vegetables at Kalimpong town or the nearby towns but after ecotourism was introduced the villagers have to no more go to the local market to sell their vegetables because all their vegetables are retained by the people involved in hotel and catering business, thus saving their transportation cost.

5.1.2 Opportunities for Youths

There are lots of youths residing in the village of Kalimpong who are either unemployed or are working in nearby towns like Kalimpong, Gangtok and Siliguri. Some of the youths are also working in foreign countries like Dubai, Singapore, Abu Dhabi etc. but after the initiation of ecotourism a lot of opportunities have suddenly cropped up for the unemployed youths. Career options are enhanced as trainer, tourist guide or running tourism business. Today a lot of local youths are involved in the tourism sector in one way or other. For instance a person who owns a home stay in Ramdhura told that he used to work in Dubai a year

back and after returning he started his own home-stays. Right now staying in his own village with his family he is earning more than the amount he used earn while working in Dubai.

5.1.3 Change in Attitude

A lot of people residing in the villages of Kalimpong are simple-minded, illiterate and conservative but after the inflow of tourists from different communities the mindset of the local villagers are changing. They are becoming more open to an alien person and a huge sense of self confidence has enhanced their personality. The villagers have become more open minded and tourist friendly.

5.1.4. Creation of Jobs

After the introduction of ecotourism in different rural areas of Kalimpong a lot of jobs were created not only in the field of homestays and catering but also in transportation, retailing, and in information/heritage interpretation.

5.1.5 Self-independent

The villagers have become self dependent after the tourism industry was initiated. They no more have to depend upon their meager government salary or other government funds because they can earn more money through the tourism sector.

5.1.6 Women Empowerment

Women of different villages are taking initiative to flourish the tourism. Their efficiency is proved by the fact that more female members are involved as compared to male in the tourism sector. These women though on one hand are creating some major employment opportunities for themselves as well as other villagers but at the same time they are trying to maintain the sustainability of the environment. In many villages women have installed traditional dustbins throughout the village. They even encourage the tourist to use the dustbins. A lot of women are also forming self – help groups and making local handicrafts to sell.

5.1.7 Development

After the introduction of ecotourism a lot of improvements have been taking place in terms of roadways and other areas is taking place due to political pressure from the tourist authorities. Constructions of small roads are also taking place within the villages through the scheme of MGNREGA. The authorities are also taking major steps for beautification of the major ecotourism spots.

5.2 FUTURE PROSPECTS

Ecotourism has now almost become a major source of living for the population of some rural areas. As mentioned above a lot of changes have taken place in the environment as well as society of the rural areas after the initiation of ecotourism. Ecotourism has boosted the villages in a very positive way but still this area needs a lot of development to be considered as a major ecotourism hotspot. Hence, below given are some prospects which if implemented in future may play a significant role to further boost the tourism industry of the area.

- (i) After brief stays in some of the villages it has been found out that the local villagers earn their livelihood by practicing hunting, poaching, deforestation and various other activities which could hamper the natural environment and tourism sector of the village. Not only adults but small kids were also seen running after birds with catapult in their hands for their personal interests. So, to maintain a sustainable ecotourism following methods workshops and seminars can be conducted by government and different NGOs to educate the people about environmental sustainability and biodiversity conservation.
- (ii) Construction of an eco-park where the local flora and fauna could be conserved for their sustainability.
- (iii) Construction of a heritage centre through which local culture and authenticity of the village can be showcased.
- (iv) In most of the villages ecotourism is totally based on personal funding so, if the state or the local Government help the local villagers in some way or other the ecotourism would definitely flourish in future.
- (v) Tourism information centre, public transport enhancement, scenic road construction training in hospitality skills can be done for the enhancement of ecotourism.
- (vi) Since most of the people from rural areas of Kalimpong are not well educated hence they are not aware of the safety provisions and better infrastructure. Therefore, it is mandatory to install proper infrastructure and safety provisions for the tourist.
- (vii) Since the major population of the rural areas are economically unsound hence most of them are dependent on natural fuels to cook their food hence it is utmost important to minimize the use of natural fuels to conserve the local environment.
- (viii) Preservation, protection and enhancement of the quality of the resources, which are the basis of tourism.
- (ix) Protection, in – situ and ex – situ conservation and monitoring of flora and fauna.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Ecotourism is one way of sustainable tourism; it is an instrument for natural protection and at the same time assures sustainable economic benefits for local people. Ecotourism can be understood as environmental, sociological and economic category. As economic category it can crucially contribute to sustainable rural development and it is at the same time a motor of development. As sociological category it can contribute to higher awareness of public about importance of nature protection, at the same time visitors have impression that with their appropriate treatment contribute to protection and maintenance of nature. As economic category ecotourism assure promotion and marketing of products from protected areas like nature, cultural heritage, clean water, fresh air, local authentic products (also from ecological farming). But all kind of tourism activities and their development should be adjusted with local population in protected areas (Udovč & Perpar, 2007)

Since the concept of ecotourism is new to this area and in fact unknown to maximum people residing in this village. Without any doubt it seems fair to say that ecotourism indeed has played significant roles for the development of status of some of the rural areas of Kalimpong district hence it seems that ecotourism is here to stay, but this place is still at a very early and delicate stage in its growth.

This area has a great potential to turn into an ecotourism hotspot like, Munnar (Kerela), Kodikanal (Tamil Nadu), Coorg (Karnataka), Tyda (Andhra Pradesh), Chilika (Odisha) etc. but the task of changing the place into an ecotourism hotspot is not easy. Therefore to make the district a favored ecotourism spot the people who are involved in this business should not only look upon this business as a financial venture but also should make real and important contributions for conservation of natural environment and development of disadvantaged communities because if there is no natural environment there is no ecotourism.

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