

ECO-TOURISM: THE MANTRA FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL LIVELIHOOD

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Abstract:

Is eco-tourism the answer for sustainable development in Rural India? Over the past five years there has been an upward trend in the tourism activities, especially eco-tourism activities in the State of Assam. Tourists have been heading to such destinations to experience the beauty of nature. The study analyses the socio-economic viability and the innovations incorporated by the eco-tourism ventures in the light of sustainable development. It also explores the various problems and prospects of the eco-tourism entrepreneurs in Rural Assam. This is a qualitative paper with Case study methodology. From the inferences derived, the researcher has provided some suggestions on how eco-tourism can lead to sustainable rural livelihood.

Keywords:

Eco-tourism, tourism entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, innovations, Assam, Rural livelihood, rural tourism, eco-village.

Introduction:

“The future of India Lies in its Villages” – Mahatma Gandhi Rural India is very rich and has lots to offer, provided it is utilised properly. The cities cannot provide enough jobs for the youths of the country for a comfortable living. Demographic dividend of the country being another reason. The rural parts of the country are still agrarian in nature. Structural change is required for sustaining rural livelihood. A livelihood is said to be sustainable when it maintains or enhances the local and global assets on which livelihoods depend, and has net beneficial effects on other livelihoods. A livelihood is socially sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, and provide for future generations. Promotion of tourism or rather we can say Eco tourism can be a solution for the problem of sustainable rural livelihood. Tourism is one of the world’s largest industries with a huge global economic contribution. This sector is vital for many countries, such as Egypt, Greece, Spain, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines etc. as it offers huge employment opportunities as well as a market for various products and services. In a country like India where around 65% of the population lives in rural areas, tourism can serve as a significant tool to develop the rural areas. Ecotourism is a form of tourism involving visiting fragile, pristine, and relatively undisturbed natural areas, intended as a low-impact and often small scale alternative to standard commercial mass tourism. Sustainable rural development is vital to the economic, social and environmental viability of nations specially developing nations. Through this paper, the researcher intends to explore eco-tourism as a solution for sustainable rural livelihood.

Objectives:

- i) To bring into surface the prospects of Eco tourism for a sustainable rural livelihood
- ii) To study the problems faced by the Eco tourism entrepreneurs in Assam

Hypothesis:

Eco Tourism has prospects of improving rural livelihood in the light of sustainability.

Research Methodology:

This paper is descriptive and qualitative in nature. Case study methodology is used by the researcher in this paper. The researcher has identified an unique ecotourism venture for the same. Therefore the no. of cases in the paper is one. The area of study is Assam. The venture has been very innovative in its approach and received accolades for the same. The primary data is collected through interviews and observations. The secondary data is collected from different sources like books, journals, articles, and periodicals.

Review of Literature:

Rural tourism can change the scenario of an area. It can leverage the development in the rural parts where other commercial activities are restricted. Gurung (2013) in his study focused on rural tourism as a tool for research development. He pointed out the importance of promoters and community people working together towards business models. Borthakur (2017) chalked out the benefits of community from tourism. The study explained how tourism strengthened the socio economic conditions of the community. The main problem found from his study was that local people lacked the expertise and skills required for tourism sector. In the Aamaar Aalohi, Rural homestay scheme (2017-18) focus has been to empower the local community by creating tourism related employment. One of the main objectives of the scheme is to strengthen the participation and decision making in tourism of rural committees. It aims at providing a new experience to the visitors in a sparsely populated natural environment.

Case Study

Tourism is the practice of travelling for recreational, leisure and business purposes. It is one of the popular global leisure activities. There has been a consistent upward trend in this sector over the last few years. It is one of the major sources of revenue generation in many developing nations. It brings in a substantial amount of foreign exchange in the country. Assam is one of the eight states of North east India. It is the central state of the region which serves as a gateway to the rest of the seven states. Assam is much more than the beautiful tea gardens, the mighty Brahmaputra, the precious one horned Rhinos in Kaziranga and the splendidly dressed groups dancing Bihu to the rhythms of the Dhol and Pepa. This diverse and beautiful state comprises of three main geographical areas: The Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak valley and the mysterious Mikir and Cachar Hills. It is endowed with plentiful natural and cultural resources which can form a basis for a lucrative tourism industry, creating employment and generating income not only in the urban centres but also in the rural areas. It has every scope of being a preferred tourist destination worldwide. Its beauty is its strength. The potentials of the state lay various opportunities in form of different innovative ventures (direct or indirectly related to tourism) that can be taken up by entrepreneurs especially in the rural areas where other opportunities lack. Rural Assam hosts various beautiful destinations which can attract tourists, provided they are developed in such a way that visitors can experience nature with some amount of comfort and thrill. Eco tourism is a popular concept in the country as well as abroad today. The urge for going back to the roots has been increasing with the urban dwellers packed with hectic life in the cities and the level of pollution going up at the same time. Eco Tourism ventures in the rural areas can help in the development of rural areas in ways of infrastructure development, job opportunities, economic gain, conservation of natural resources, etc.

Pobitora Village Eco camp

Situated in the magical Mayong village of Morigaon district in Assam, Pobitora village Eco camp was started by Mr.Champak Deka. It was started in the year 2015. Mr. Deka has always been very passionate about wildlife and nature. He has been active in wildlife conservation from a very long time. His entrepreneurial spirit urged him do something different. Being a wildlife lover himself, he liked showing people around Pobitora. He is like a living book with every minute details of the place. He talks about the birds, Rhinos, elephants and other animals there like his own family members. Also he wanted to do something for the community people so that they can be engaged somewhere apart from working in agricultural lands. That was the beginning of Pobitora Village Eco camp. With a bare minimum investment of only Rs.7000, he started with one cottage and four tents and a kitchen. Investments were less because the structure of the cottages were made of the bamboos and woods available in the village itself. From the first season itself, the place was a hit amongst the tourists. It managed to attract foreign tourists as well. There are many tourists who come back in the next season as well because of the hospitality of Mr. Deka. As of now there are 5 cottages, a kitchen and numerous tents. He employs around 10 staffs. But the number of employees decreases during the off season.

Findings:

Innovations and USPs

- Eco friendly
- Has its own organic kitchen garden and feeds the guests with those organic healthy vegetables. It doesn't have a set menu and food is served to the guests according to their tastes and preferences.
- No concrete structures in the campus and is full of greenery. Hornbills are attracted to the lush greenery of the place and often visits the campus to the visitor's delight.

- No TVs in the cottages which gives the guests an opportunity for digital detox.
- Bonfire at night.
- Hospitality is spot on. Mr. Deka himself makes sure that his guests are comfortable. He himself accompanies his guests for the elephant safari where he loads them with information about the wildlife in Pobitora.
- Wildlife photography workshops and Photowalks.
- Cycling along the village roads
- Problems
- It is seasonal. Dealing with 6 long months of off season when there are no tourists is difficult.
- Communication Bottlenecks. With tourists inflow from various parts of the country and the world, knowledge basic English and Hindi apart from Assamese is expected from the staffs.
- Marketing is done through social media only apart from word of mouth publicity. It is absent from various digital platforms.

Thus, we can accept the hypothesis that Eco Tourism has prospects of improving rural livelihood in the light of sustainability.

Discussions and Conclusion

Although Assam has been trying to promote various innovative forms of tourism in the rural as well as urban areas like Tea tourism, wildlife tourism, golf tourism, adventure tourism, religious tourism, film tourism etc., the development is still at the infant stage. The existing tourist sites have not been properly developed and maintained for its long term sustainability. In Assam, there seems to be an absence of community engagement and involvement in tourism activities. This may be due to the lack of need based education or entrepreneurial ability, communication bottlenecks, lack initiatives from the Government's end, lack of funds, etc.

But now there is a new wave of tourism entrepreneurship in Assam. With youths like Champak Deka who are taking initiatives for the community development with keeping in mind not to harm nature, it is commendable. Eco tourism can be the perfect solution for a sustainable rural livelihood. The Eco tourism model of Pobitora Village eco camp has lots to learn from. With bare minimum investments, using what is in and around and also keeping in mind mother nature, it is creating business, employment opportunities and also economic growth of the State. Apart from Economic growth it is also helping in promotion and preservation of Assamese tradition and culture. Every season business is doubled with the growing no. of tourists. It is an example as well inspiration for other parts of the country as well as the State. Lots of youth in the place aspire to create something like Pobitora Village Eco Camp in the near future and help promotion of rural tourism and in turn economic growth of the place.

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